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TWENTIETH CENTURY CAVEMEN

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TWENTIETH CENTURY CAVEMAN

by

Lucy Baras

On Saturday, the 16th of September 1939, the sky in the west was fire-red. The sun, partially hidden behind the stony hills of the village of Nowosiolka, had painted the blue dome with pink, deep orange and brilliant yellow that flowed into lavender streaks. In all my twenty-six years I had never seen such a splendid natural spectacle.

In our small city of Skalat in the southeastern corner of Poland there was no shortage of superstitious characters, wise prophets, and forecasters of pending catastrophes.

"One thing is sure," sighed Moyshe Nafta. "It's a bad sign."

Nafta was not his real name. In those days nicknames were given, especially among the poor and lower social classes, in accordance with looks, behavior, employment, merits or faults.

When I was about ten years old, standing in front of our house, I watched Moyshe delivering invitations to neighbors. Hiring Moyshe was much cheaper than using the post office -- and faster.

"What are you bringing today, Mr. Nafta?" I asked.

He did not answer. His face turned purple and he threw the envelope at me. When I told Mother what happened, she gave me a lesson in small town manners.

"You should have called him Mr. Moyshe. His name is not Nafta. Hardly anyone knows his last name."

"Then why do they call him so?"

"Because when he was a youngster he stole some kerosene from a store. Some people are unmerciful. They never forgive and never forget. The name will stick to him for the rest of his life."

In the days before electricity arrived in Skalat--the big event occurred in 1926--kerosene (*nafta* in Polish) was a staple commodity.

After that I became careful in sorting out names. It wasn't easy. Moyshe Nafta was not the only one.

"This means we'll have a big storm tonight," said Fayga, the Fisherwoman, pointing toward the red sky.

Not many people paid attention to her. Most of us were milling around to catch some news from the war zone.

"Storm? Storm," mimicked Rachel the Liar. "So what? Big deal. A storm." She cupped her hand over her mouth and squinted her eyes. "This means something much worse," she whispered. "This sky is very, very red. Too red."

The whisper did not stop with Rachel. From person to person the grim prognosis spread among the crowd. At any other time few people would have not paid attention to that kind of opinion but after sixteen days of Hitler's military progress there was enough reason to worry. Panic grew, and nobody sneered at Fayga or Rachel.

I was wondering about Rachel's nickname. Was she born a liar or did she acquire the trait during her long and probably bitter life. Her sharp thin face with the sunken cheeks, the untidy strands of grey hair sticking out and up in all directions, the sagging bags under her fiery eyes, and the crumpled dress that covered her scrawny body spoke of less than a comfortable lifestyle.

With my younger brothers, Jozek and Milo, I roamed the streets listening, watching, trying to catch words pertaining to the invasion of Poland. Rumors about the approaching German army were terrifying.

News was not easily available. Few families had radios, and those who did could not use them because the power station was out of coal and the city was without electricity. The mainly Jewish crowds gathered in the streets and marketplace could only repeat second-and third-hand reports about the military situation.

"It's getting dark. People are leaving," my sixteen-year old brother, Milo, reminded us. "Don't forget the curfew."

"The curfew is not important," said Jozek. "There's nobody here to enforce it. The main thing is that it's dangerous for Jews to be out after dark. There's no authority in the city. The Nazis aren't here yet but the hoodlums are already threatening the Jews. This morning in front of the synagogue they yelled, 'Soon we'll show you. In a day or two we'll show you what we can do.'"

"Those must have been Ukrainians," I said. "The Poles are probably too much in mourning about losing the country."

"You're right," answered Jozek. "The gang shouted in Ukrainian."

We parted. My brothers went home to our parents' house, and I to my tailor shop that served also as my living quarters. But, although deadly tired, I could not fall asleep. I had been chasing around the whole day just as my brothers and friends did, looking for lodging for the war refugees who had flooded the city. Most of the runaways were Jewish men whom the Nazis tried to enslave by sending them to concentration camps. These people arrived on foot without luggage. They had emptied out their pockets of any extra weight. The newcomers wanted to reach the Romanian border about 100 kilometers to the south. Nobody tried for the Russian border only 16 kilometers to the east. The Soviets were taboo. People who lived close to the dividing line, the river Zbrucz, were afraid to approach or even to look in that direction. It might as well have been an ocean or a desert on the other side. There was absolutely no communication.

Since the city was overcrowded, we had to scour the countryside for Jewish families who would house some of the refugees at least overnight.

At sunrise on that Saturday I had knocked at the door of my girlfriend, Rozia's, house.

"She's still asleep," her mother informed me.

I bit my lips in anger. "But she promised me...I must wake her up." I marched into the house and shook Rozia hard. "I know you're not dependable, but in such an important case... How could you? The refugees have probably started to show up in the city already."

She apologized, jumped out of bed and got dressed. I didn't allow her much time for breakfast. She swallowed a few gulps of coffee and was still chewing on her buttered bread when we left the house.

At that early hour of the morning groups of nervous, excited Jews could be seen at every corner discussing the military situation.

In passing, I heard, "The Germans are already in Tarnopol."

Tarnopol? It was only 32 kilometers from us.

I stopped. "How do you know?" I asked.

"Somebody said so."

Somebody else said the Germans were already at the outskirts of Skalat. Fear brought people two years ahead of reality. We didn't get the Germans until 1941.

Rozia and I scurried through the indifferent streets until the houses appeared farther and farther apart. We left the city walking in a brisk step along a gravel road, switching later to a dirt path. The gold-stubbed field to the right and the flower dotted meadow to the left were just as indifferent to our problems as the brooding and listless city dwellings.

"Do you know the Feldmans?" Rozia asked.

I did not know them.

"Then... Why do we go there?"

"Because they are Jews. They are wealthy. I'm sure they have a spare room."

"I heard they're people for themselves. They might not want to do it."

"We'll make them do it. Some people have hearts bigger than others, but everybody has a heart, no matter how small."

By the time we reached the Feldman house, the sun was warming our backs intensely. My face was burning and my heart was pumping loud after the fast, three kilometer-long walk. Our shoes were covered with the grey dust of the unpaved road, and our damp dresses stuck to our backs. Rozia bent over the low picket fence and unlatched the gate. We heard a growl of a dog. We did not look dangerous. The beast was restrained. We must have been seen but nobody besides the dog welcomed us. A narrow path through the flower garden filled with the fragrances of roses and carnations led to an open side door. With my feet outside of the house and my head inside, I called out "Good morning" in a very loud voice.

A large woman with sturdy bones and a halo of grey hair around her head appeared in the hallway. Not a muscle moved in her round face.

"*Pani* Feldmanova?" I asked.

She nodded her head. "Yes?"

We introduced ourselves. "You probably know," I said, "that refugees fleeing Hitler, Polish and Germans Jews, are pouring into the city. They need places to stay. We hope that you might...”

"At least for one night," Rozia interrupted me.

The woman's eyebrows came closer to one another forming two deep grooves. She asked us into the house with a wave of her hand. I accepted it as a mixed signal.

"These people are aiming for the southern border," I said. "They want to go to Romania."

"Please, sit down," Feldmanova said.

The cloth-covered kitchen table was inviting. The cold sour milk (a kind of yogurt) the maid brought from the basement was refreshing on that hot blistering morning. 'She does have a heart,' I thought to myself.

Pan Feldman, a man with a tough-guy look, thickly knitted dark eyebrows and nostrils filled with black hair, emerged from the next room. He nodded his head and emitted a garbled word or two. Maybe a form of a greeting.

"These ladies want us to take in refugees," Feldmanova said to her husband. "You know, those who run away from Hitler."

He narrowed his green eyes and turned toward us. "And what kind of people would you bring into my house? Communists? All the refugees are communists. They're afraid of Hitler. So they run. Why don't they go to Russia, to their Bolshevik friends?"

Something was churning, boiling, revolting inside me. I had to restrain myself. We needed their help badly. There were not many rich Jews in or around the city.

"Yes, you're right, Mr. Feldman," I said. "Hitler is anti-communist but he's also anti-Jewish. We must help the Jews who are fleeing from his persecution. Who cares about their politics? You let them wash up in your house, give them a bed for a night, maybe a meal or two, and they'll be gone. Is it so much to ask from people who have a roof over their heads?"

I thought I located a ray of guilt in his face. The terror in his eyes had diminished. He turned toward his wife but she was facing the garden as if trying to smell the flowers through the open window. I did not know who was the boss of the house, and I had to appeal to both of them.

"They probably left elderly parents," I continued, "homes full of furniture and gardens full of flowers."

Rozia's nails were boring into my thigh.

"What do you think, Esther?" he asked.

"I think ... maybe ... one person..."

"Make it two, please," I said. The 'please' almost choked me. They didn't deserve to be begged. "Just in case one brings a wife."

"But make sure they are not the eighth company," added Esther in a solemn tone of voice.

In the daily language of those days it meant -- no low class people, no underworld, no communists. I felt like telling her I didn't know more about those refugees than she did. I did not check their education, social position or financial situation.

Feldman gave us the description of his carriage that would be waiting at six o'clock in front of the Sokol building.

Rozia thanked them, and I uttered a quick "good-bye."

After a short rest at home I went to the main street, the highway where refugees arrived from the West. I hoped to find "high society" people suited for the distinguished Feldman household. I spotted a young woman hanging on the arm of a tall, well-built man. From the glint in her eyes and splotches on her cheeks I judged her to be feverish. She plopped herself down on the curb with her feet in the gutter and despair on her face. She seemed to have shrunk within herself as if saying 'I'll stay here forever.' Her wrinkled dress and dusty shoes were of a good cut, her dark hair was tangled and matted, and her white hands with long fingers lay helplessly on her knees. She could have been beautiful and she could have been ugly but she was different although I could not pinpoint in which way. Her sad eyes hinted timidity but the square, almost manly jaw suggested determination.

I approached the man who stood behind her with his hands on her shoulders. His blond hair, wet with perspiration, lay pasted down on his skull. His sky blue eyes sat deep in their sockets but popped out every time the commotion in the street turned louder.

And the commotion kept growing, especially in view of the approaching night. The retreating sun ignited a few clouds and changed them into purple floats before setting half of the sky on fire. Curiosity and restlessness had chased the population, especially the Jews, out of their homes. The outdoor discussions, conferences, debates and polemics about the dangerous situation didn't stop until nightfall. Later they continued indoors.

My offer of help was rapidly accepted by the German speaking couple. After their short rest I walked them to the Sokol, a beautiful landmark on the outskirts of the city. The building served as a sports club for the Polish elite but was also rented out to the general public, including Jews, for dances and theatrical performances.

I could not ask the driver to bring the coach to the busy street where other needy refugees waited for a chance to get a bed for the night.

Remembering the reception we had received of the Feldmans' in the morning, I did not dare to send them more than two persons.

There was hardly any conversation between me and the strangers. I put them in the comfortable *bryczka* and promised to visit them the next morning.

I returned to the crowd and joined my brothers in watching the flaming sky and listening to the fateful predictions.

CHAPTER 2

A dream? I was hearing noises. An uproar. Loud voices. Tumult. Could it be the Germans had entered the city? Impossible. The front line was too far away. It was Sunday. Churchgoers? They were never that noisy.

I leaped out of bed, hopped over to the window and could not believe my eyes. Soldiers in green uniforms were marching in full military gear. And it was not the Polish army although they also wore green. According to word of mouth, remnants of our infantry and cavalry were still fighting the German tanks in the West. These soldiers were coming from the East. And they did not look like defeated warriors. Rather they seemed to be participating in a parade.

My tailor shop was set back some distance from the road. I wrapped myself in a housecoat, shoved my feet into a pair of slippers and ran out of the house. Crowds with inquiring faces lined the streets. Up and down, whichever way I looked, I saw green uniforms. They did not march. They walked nonchalantly, smiling, talking to each other and occasionally to bystanders.

The Soviet taboo had revealed itself by sending the flood of the Red Army pouring into Poland. For a short moment, maybe for a second, I hoped they came as friends to help the Polish Army fight the Nazis, but recalling the twenty years of Soviet history, I dismissed the idea. The Communists knew how devastated the Polish troops were. They came to dance at the funeral and claim an inheritance.

Rays of the early sun bathed the treetops and the tin roofs of the houses with a pink and gold glow. A light breeze rustled the branches, the birds twittered 'good morning,' but the shuffle of heavy boots on the gravel road dominated the air.

"There was a sign from heaven yesterday, " yelled an old woman dressed in a shabby man's coat. "The red sun prophesied the coming of the Red Army. Now somebody will take care of the poor."

A teen-age girl jumped up and down clapping her hands.

"What are you so happy about?" I asked.

"I can't have less than one shirt, can I?" she answered. "So what have I got to lose?"

I went back to my room and got dressed, ready to go home for breakfast as I did every morning. Food would not be the subject of conversation. I was sure of that.

My landlady, *pani* Wlochowiczowa, a plumb, pleasant elderly woman, and her newlywed daughter, *pani* Slowikowa, blocked the front steps. The mother wiped her eyes with the corner of her apron, and the daughter, her face tear-streaked and her golden braids unkempt, repeated "Why? Why?"

Her husband of four weeks had been inducted into the military service on the first of September, the day of Hitler's attack. I could not find any words to comfort them.

The old lady crossed herself. "He's fighting for the fatherland. God will take care of him."

Pan Wlochowicz, a man of great stature and gentle disposition, joined us. "Did you see those Bolsheviks?" he asked. "They also want a share. How do you like that?"

"Would you have preferred the Germans?" I asked.

"That's a good question," he said. "Germans or Russians. An enemy is an enemy and we Poles will be the slaves."

On the way home I met Zonia Gierczakowa, a customer of mine. She asked when her dress would be ready. Dress? Customers. As if I were awakened from a dream. I had forgotten my obligations.

"Yes. Yes. I remember. The beautiful print fabric with the yellow roses." I had to go back to daily life. I could not afford to neglect my customers. "Why don't you come in, let's say, Thursday, for a fitting? By the way... What do you think of this eastern invasion?"

She clenched her teeth and plunged her right fist into her left palm. "The devil take them all. I'd go for anyone who'd give us our own independent Ukrainian state."

A member of her family had spent time in the Bereza Kartuzka concentration camp for open defiance of the Polish government.

"And if we become part of the Soviet Ukraine, would it make you happy?"

"What's the difference? Who needs the Communists? They'd bring in Russian colonists just as the Poles brought Polish colonists from the West."

"Would you have preferred the Germans?"

She gave me a prolonged look. "Why not?" They promised us an independent Ukraine."

According to Polish history books, an independent Ukraine never existed. The ethnic Ukrainians lived always either under Polish or Russian rule. The Polish government did not tolerate the name 'Ukrainians' although it was not officially forbidden. These people were called 'Russki' because they were members of the Greek Catholic church whose rites are more closely related to the Orthodox Russian than to the Roman Catholic church, the prevailing religion of the Poles. Intermarriages between Poles and Ukrainians were common. The children were raised according to the gender; girls were baptized in the mother's religion, boys in the father's. The Ukrainian peasants, often illiterate, did not bother with politics and did not know much about the fierce nationalism of their city intellectuals. But they were united in hate toward the Jews and the Polish colonists who had been awarded land rights on convenient financial terms.

"See you on Thursday," I said to Zonia.

I did not expect great happiness under the Soviets but I was sure it would be safer for the Jews than under the Nazis.

That morning I came to the conclusion that the Christians looked at us with suspicion, as if the arrival of the Red Army were our fault.

What was a Jew supposed to do and how was he to act? The old-fashioned hate was so ingrained that seemingly no power on earth was able to reverse it. In the Middle Ages, when the black plague raged through Europe, the Jews were accused of poisoning the wells. Even the pope's intervention, stating that the Jews were also dying, did not help. Christ's teachings about Love and Peace on Earth had not reached our villagers. "Jews killed Christ." This was the "holy" bible the primitive worshippers heard every Sunday from the pulpit. And they were willing to carry on the two thousand year-old grudge for the next two thousand years and into eternity.

Later in the day when I arrived at the Feldmans', I hardly recognized the elderly hosts. They seemed to have aged overnight. Esther sat motionlessly in her deep plush chair with her arms interlocked over her full bosom. Only her reddened eyes winked and flickered. She did not answer my greeting. Her husband was in constant motion. He circled the room, waved his arms and shook his head from side to side.

"It can't be. We can't have the Communists here," he mumbled. He looked at me with a tense, furious expression on his face. "You must have heard what the Bolsheviks did to their industrialists and businessmen at the time of the revolution."

I had read plenty about the Soviet system. "You shouldn't worry," I said. "It's twenty years later. Anyway, they wouldn't bother with such a small plant as yours." I lied. I did not have any idea about the size of his distillery but I knew that in our underdeveloped county his was the largest manufacturing enterprise.

Pan Feldman cast his eyes toward the ceiling as if in despair at my stupidity. "You don't know the Soviets."

"Would you have felt more secure with the Nazis?" I asked.

He did not answer. His wife took her hands off her chest. The little blue veins in her neck grew taut. Her nostrils distended. "The Germans don't have a Siberia to send their citizens to," she said.

I wondered whether she knew that the German Jews had been stripped of their citizenship.

Clean and refreshed, wearing different clothes probably provided by the hosts, the refugee couple came into the room. They introduced themselves as Kurt and Inge Steger.

"I'm afraid you can't go to Romania," I said.

"You're probably right," answered Inge. "The roads must be clogged with the military."

"The Soviets closed the border," I added.

I was at a loss for words. I considered the atmosphere of the house not conducive to the prolongation of the Stegers' visit and I did not have any other quarters for them.

Inching over toward Esther who sat with slouched shoulders and head hanging down onto her chest, Inge put her arms around the older woman's neck. "You should not stew like that. You better do something. Whenever I expect something bad, I try to prevent it. Look around the house. You know what I mean... Be prepared. Just in case... they do come." She tipped her head and showed her pearly teeth in a half-smile. "May we come back for the next night?"

Esther jumped off the armchair and grabbed Inge's hand.

"Not only you may. We want you." Her voice was full of remorse. "We need you. We feel so cut off from the world."

Mayer Feldman was crossing the room back and forth with a hurried, impatient step. "Why don't you go to town. Hear what's going on. Maybe you can find out what other people do," he said to Inge.

I understood 'other' meant other rich ones. "There's nothing going on," I said. "The Red Army is marching and the bystanders are gaping at them and their mighty tanks."

"That's what I'd like to see," said Kurt with great enthusiasm. I was surprised. He had hardly opened his mouth until then.

"I'll drive you to the city," Mayer Feldman said. "It's Sunday. Petro does not work ..."

"No. You you won't," interrupted Esther. "You shouldn't even show your face in the city."

He spread his arms in desperation. "You're darn right. I better not."

"Nothing wrong with walking," said Inge and turned toward the door.

Esther stopped her. "Mrs. Steger... Inge, please, it's far. You were sick yesterday. You need more rest."

"Nothing wrong with me. You helped me recover. I feel fine. Listen to me. You two take care of each other and of your problems. You might have to destroy some papers. Maybe other things too. Check the house from top to bottom. Believe me. I'm speaking from experience."

The Stegers were asked to come back for lunch and we left.

"I told them," said Inge when we were outside, "to hide or destroy their business records and anything that might discriminate them in the eyes of the Communists."

"I suppose you know," I said, "that everyone who makes a decent living is considered rich in their eyes."

"Many of us had to clean houses when Hitler came to power," said Kurt. "There were many Communists in Germany after World War I. You probably know how Hitler hunted them."

Had they been Communists? I could not imagine them marching with the rank and file.

We took a shortcut through the flower-speckled meadow. Once in a while Inge would bend down to pluck a poppy seed blossom, a white or yellow daisy, or a blue corn cockle. In a few minutes she had fashioned a sizable bouquet which she kept turning around in admiration. And I admired her calm disposition especially in view of Kurt's stiff, tense walk and apprehensive behavior.

"Are you really curious to see the Soviet soldiers?" I asked him.

"Very much so," he answered.

I glanced at him again and again and came to the conclusion that he did not look Jewish. I've seen Jews with turned up noses, with blue eyes and grey eyes, with blond hair and brown hair, but this man had it all, including the military carriage of a Prussian officer. The day before with his dirty, hairy face and rumpled suit he was a typical refugee. Now the transformation was clear.

I could not resist the temptation. "You don't look Jewish," I said.

"I'm not," he answered with a sudden smile. "I'm glad you discovered on your own. I'm not a Jew but I feel like one. After all, I have a Jewish wife. We planned to tell you but just didn't get around to it."

"Intermarriages were common in Germany," said Inge. "Hitler tried to separate those couples. As you see, he was not successful with us."

This was news to me. Mixed marriages were rare in Poland. Probably because both Jews and Christians were more religious than in the West. Kurt grew in my eyes to the size of a hero. He followed her through all the trepidations of a Jew in Germany; she must be worth it. Unless it's true that love is blind.

Watching the Soviet army passing by, Kurt commented on different military equipment with great interest and knowledge.

The infantry had entered the city through the unpaved northern road while the motorized columns took the eastern gravel road, the best the county could offer. Tanks, trucks and other vehicles I could not name, thundered, rumbled, roared, and mashed the gravel into powder. The southern hot wind carried the dust into swirls that covered everything around, the houses, the spectators and the soldiers. The 'clay giant' as the Poles used to call their Soviet neighbor whom they expected to collapse any day, was marching on massive iron legs.

Baffled, I stared at the military display in bewilderment and did not hide my ignorance about the armored machinery.

"It's interesting to compare," remarked Kurt.

Compare? I wondered. And I inquired. Yes. He had served in the German army. He left Germany illegally.

CHAPTER 3

The curfew had been lifted. The Soviet Union was at peace with the world. The war was raging only in the West. The occupation of eastern Poland by her next door neighbor had not caused a ripple in the conscience of the world.

One evening when I returned to my tailor shop, my landlady handed me a piece of wrinkled paper addressed to me. Written in Cyrillic letters, the summons ordered me to appear at the courthouse the next morning at eight o'clock. No signature. I was petrified. How did the Communists get my name? What do they know about me? Then I remembered that the courthouse was not functioning. No civil office had been organized. But I knew that the invaders had collected and dumped truckloads of Polish documents into that building.

I hoped to get a good night's sleep so I could face the unexpected in the morning, but I hoped in vain. My nerves tingled and twitched like live electric wires. My heart jolted. When I finally fell asleep, I was chopping wood in the Siberian tundra.

I was not the only one invited. Two teen-agers, a Jewish boy, and a Ukrainian girl, shared my fate. No Poles. A clear case of political implication. The youngsters did not seem happy either. The girl showed her teeth in a sour grimace, and the boy took up a pseudo-fighting position with his chin up and fists clenched.

After we had stood for about an hour in the hallway, a soldier with a blue stripe on his cap ushered us into a room full of military men all wearing the same caps. Most of them, sprawled on chairs and tables, untidy and disheveled in their rumpled clothes and dusty boots, looked as if they had just gotten off their trucks after a long trip. One man, sitting at a heavy walnut desk, stood out. His appearance was civil, his features were pleasant, his clothes clean and pressed, and when he rose from his chair, I noticed his neatly polished shoes.

The man moved toward us with a slow, measured step and gave us a suspicious, from-behind-the-brow glance. I had to raise my head; he was very tall. His cap tipped toward the back of his naked forehead made him look taller yet. His face could have been cast in stone if not for the lively, shrewd, ferocious glint in his black eyes. To me he seemed different from the rest of the world. I had always connected a fierce look with light-colored, steely eyes that had a transparent surface and showed a deep abyss. In dark eyes I would see only a flat, impenetrable surface that did not indicate any depth. I had to admit to myself that my theory was wrong.

"So, you are the translators." It was not a question. It was a statement. Translators? The word perplexed me.

"Follow me," came the order from above. The tall man led us into an adjoining room where half the floor was covered with slips of papers of different colors and sizes.

"These documents must be translated into Ukrainian." He did not ask whether we wanted to work. He ordered us. "I'm chairman Zubchenko. You'll find me in the next room if you need me."

Chairman. 'Chairman of what?' I asked myself. He was a military man but didn't give his rank. Neither did he give his first name. It was an announcement. When he spoke, his lips hardly moved. His voice was loud and clear but it sounded like crackling ice.

"How can we work?" I asked. "No chairs. No tables."

He pointed toward open doors to other rooms. "Look there. You'll find everything you need." He began walking toward his office but turned back. "You are in charge." His long arm with the extended index finger pointed at me. He left.

I stood there with my mouth open. I? I am in charge? I was mad. Mad. Very mad. But fear had left me. I had not been arrested. Neither had I been sent to chop wood in Siberia. To sit and do translations -- it wasn't so bad.

"I'm not dragging any furniture around," I said and opened a window. Civilians were cleaning the yard and soldiers were milling around smoking their *mahorka* cigarettes rolled in newspaper.

"Hey, *tovarish,*" I called out. "We need here tables, chairs and a few other things."

As I expected, none of the local people answered my call but soldiers streamed in en masse bringing remnants of the defunct Polish courthouse. In a moment the room was full of uniforms unwilling to leave. They had their eyes on the beautiful teenage girl.

"We're working for chairman Zubchenko," I told them. The name worked like a magic broom. It swept the soldiers off the floor. We still needed paper, pens and inkwells.

"Right away," one of the men said. "I'll bring everything."

A few minutes later he furnished us with Polish pens and ink but we waited quite a while for the paper. We finally got it. Used. Already filled in on one side.

"Couldn't you get clean paper?" I asked in all my stupid innocence.

"There's nothing wrong with that paper," the soldier answered. "That's all we have. We always use only that kind."

When we were left alone, I closed the doors to the other rooms. I had a good excuse -- the draft would keep the documents flying around. Now I could get acquainted with the two youngsters. In my mid-twenties, I felt an obligation to take care of them.

I wanted to introduce myself but Marek interrupted me. "I know who you are. You are that student who became a seamstress."

Is that what I was known for? A student was any young person who attended high school or university -- the word "college" was unknown. Grade school children were not students; they were pupils.

"Why are you so surprised?" continued Marek. "Don't you know that in our small city we know everybody and everything that's a little bit out of line?"

He was right. The Jews lived with open doors, open mouths, and open ears. News spread with the speed of fire.

I did not feel comfortable. Marek treated me like a kind of celebrity.

Few people in our community had an education above the seven grades our local school offered. The nearest high school was located 32 kilometers away in Tarnopol where I had attended a private gymnasium (high school preparatory for university) on a scholarship. It did not happen to a Jewish kid very often. That by itself made me well known in the city. Later I turned into a sensation when I took a sewing course and opened my own tailor shop after completing two years of a four-year course in law school.

In 1933, the year Hitler came to power in neighboring Germany, the Polish government ruled that every law school graduate had to spend a seven-year apprenticeship before becoming a full-fledged lawyer. This regulation was aimed at cutting the influx of Jewish students into law, the only free profession accessible to Jews. Law graduates could become judges or notaries public, very profitable government-appointed positions but not awarded to minorities. All other schools with the exception of liberal arts had a quota, *numerus clausus*, for Jews. The Liberal Arts School provided the graduate with a teaching degree but not with a job. The schools were run by the government which did not employ Jews. Jews who could afford it received their desired degrees in foreign countries.

I had not only broken tradition but also class barrier. My father, grandfather, uncles and cousins, near and distant relatives, were all independent businessmen. Any type of commerce, no matter how small, entitled a family to membership in the middle class. A trade, like tailoring, was beneath the dignity of an average person, especially one with two years of higher education. Hungry for news wagging tongues and grinding teeth put my name on the grill. In the eyes of the working people I was an achiever. Others considered me an outcast. I disliked being placed in the public eye but I didn't care whether I was praised or criticized.

Olga, the Ukrainian girl, never heard of me. The two communities, the Jewish and the Gentile, lived side by side separated by a wall of prejudice.

The Polish documents we were reading had been gathered from different offices, city hall, county management, police, taxation, court, and other departments. I wondered. Why did the Soviets have to know who stole the wash from the attic of the Bochniewicz family or who paid a fine for keeping the store open on Sunday? But, there, I found something hot... Pawel Oliszewski crossed the river Zbrucz -- the border between Poland and the U.S.S.R. -- and was safely back within three hours. I caught on. No wonder they didn't trust any Pole with this dirty work. But they were mistaken if they expected me to be the spy. Although I did not know who Oliszewski was, I was not willing to betray him. I had to get out of this. I was working for the hated, infamous, most barbarian political security system in the world, the GPU. (At the time I did not know that the name had been changed to NKVD. Later it became the KGB.) I had read enough on the subject to make me shiver, especially the thought of Lubianka, the jail in Moscow.

What was I doing here? My heart sank and my nerves jarred. Anger rumbled in my insides. While staring at the papers, I grappled with the problem. I will not be an informer, I will not be an informer, I kept repeating to myself. But how do I get out of this mess? Should I translate the trivial documents and skip the compromising ones? No. That would not be safe. Too noticeable.

I leaned over Olga's paper. 'A drunkard fought with the police' I read.

"Is it important for them to know this?" I asked.

"But... I was told..."

"Told by whom? Did he hire you?"

"Maybe. Isn't this what you call hiring?"

"He didn't mention any payment, did he?" asked Marek.

"Listen to me, kids," I said. "This is not a job for you. Let them bring their own people to do their dirty work."

Olga's blue eyes turned into saucers. "What should we do. I'm scared."

So was I.

"What's wrong with what we're doing?" The pen jittered in Marek's hand and his face was as white as the paper in front of him.

"Don't ask questions. I'll explain it some other time." 'If they let me,' I added to myself. "Now scram. Here. Through the back door. Across the yard. Run."

"And what about you? Are you staying?" asked Marek.

"Look me up tomorrow. I hope to be home." But I wasn't sure.

I opened the door to Zubchenko's office and went straight to his desk. He saw me but did not raise his head. Neither did he stop flipping his papers.

"*Shto takoye*?" What's going on?

"I can't do translations and I can't supervise others," I said. "I'm not fluent enough in the Ukrainian language. I forgot most of what I knew." I mixed Polish and Ukrainian words purposely.

His big glittering eyes were ready to spear me. "You live in the Ukraine and you don't know the language?" His low, deep, calm voice was in complete contrast with his angry eyes.

"I had five years of it back in grade school, and that's all. After that I didn't use it anymore. I attended Polish schools."

His face was red. His chin quivered. His eyebrows were knitted. His nostrils were undulated. His eyes were killing me. But his voice stayed low and composed.

"Everybody here speaks Ukrainian," he said.

"In the villages many do. But the city people speak Polish."

He raised himself to his great full length and waved his hand with a flinging gesture toward the door. "*Poshol*!" Be gone. His eyes and face were on fire but there was no excitement in the tone of this voice.

With the speed of a hurricane I ran down the worn-out wooden steps. I did not expect any persecution because the occupation was only a few days old. There was no administration. Only chaos.

Once outside, I looked back at the building, the oldest in the city. It had survived centuries of glory and defeat, and it showed it. The poor Polish government could neither afford to restore nor to demolish it. To the east of the courthouse my eyes encompassed the enormous plateau with the ruins of the ancient castle. Four massive red-roofed towers, one in each corner, and a still prominent dry moat were supposed to defend the fortress. The towers with their gaping shooting holes in the upper parts of the walls looked as if they could withstand another attack but their insides were full of debris, and only one tower was accessible to curiosity seekers. Some courageous children used it as a hiding place and bragged later about seeing ghosts. At one time, being an inquisitive teen-ager, I took a few steps inside the basement of the tower. After noticing the black walls sheeted with stingy spider webs, bats dangling from crevices, and something, a rat or a mouse scurrying around my feet, I left in a hurry. As if I knew that some day Jews would be murdered in that place.

Being Jewish, I had never had access to government documents but I had always hoped to learn the history of the castle. Now I knew I'd have to forget it. The history of the castle was in Soviet hands. According to legend, the estate had belonged to Polish aristocracy and that's what the Russians were refuting. Now it was in the western part of their Ukraine.

Two days later trucks hauled away the Polish documents to Tarnopol where an archive for the occupied territories was established.

CHAPTER 4

A NEW GOD -- STALIN

For about two weeks the Soviet armed forces streamed from the East towards the West. Then the flood changed into a trickle. The first thing the Communists did in Skalat was take over the better houses. Since everything in their system was run by the government, they needed many offices as well as housing for the chairmen of all the departments. And the lesser Soviet employees also did not want to live in the slums. They all wanted to get jobs in the newly acquired western territories considered by them a kind of America where the streets were supposed to be paved with gold. The truth was that eastern Poland was the poorest part of the country. But not in the eyes of the hungry Soviets. With their worthless rubles they stuffed themselves with chicken, milk, sour cream, eggs, butter, things that only selected groups had access to in their homeland.

When an order came to evacuate, the owners of the house or apartment left immediately. No questions were asked. Siberia loomed on the horizon always.

The first office to open after the NKVD was the Regional Communist Party. It took quite some time before any civilian authority was organized. In the meantime the local people who had belonged to the illegal- - under the Polish regime -- communist party, came forward but did not receive the recognition they expected.

The marketplace that used to be filled with sellers hawking their wares, with buyers searching for bargains, with clucking chickens and honking geese, lay silent and barren.

Out of curiosity my girl friend Lora and I decided to take a peek at the city hall where the local communists tried to organize some form of an office for the sake of the poorest of the city.

A wriggling, twisting mob of needy, hungry, sick people dressed in rags, unkempt, smelling of perspiration and poor digestion, milled in and around the city council building. Those were the harmless, lonely neglected creatures considered in our class-conscious society the lowest rung of the social ladder. A standard joke circulated about them:

Why stupid? Because poor. Why poor? Because stupid. Caught in the vicious circle, they came to the unofficial council to speak up and scream out. They had expected better times under the communists but their hopes were not materializing.

The scene was not inviting. We did not go inside. Through the open window we saw a man with bushy dark hair standing on a chair or box now hacking the air with his hands, now waving them frantically as if delivering a passionate speech. We could not hear the words and did not know whether he was calming or enticing the crowd. This place was presumed to be the center of local activities but in reality it was the center of inactivities. Problems were discussed, suggestions were made, orations were delivered but results were not achieved. No decisions could be made without the bosses - the Soviets. And they were not ready to listen to the complaints of the local population.

I took Lora home. I did not want to hurt her aesthetic nature with the cruel truth. I promised to take her out when times improved, if they did.

Lora was made of a subtle soul and dainty heart and had been under stress since her husband of twenty four hours left when he was inducted into the Polish army during the general mobilization a few days before the German attack. She cut herself off from the world, and this was the first time I was able to drag her out to show her how the new administration worked or rather how it did not work. The basis of our friendship lay in our contrasting traits. Although I cried easily and could not look at blood, on problems of daily life I was a brutal realist and dealt patiently with inconveniences while Lora faltered under the slightest difficulty.

On the third day of the occupation posters requiring opening of all stores appeared on walls and fences. Merchandise had to be sold for Polish zlotys and Russian rubles on equal value. This gave us, the natives, a flicker of hope; maybe the circulation of the Polish money would continue. But it was not to happen. Later, when the shelves in the stores were empty and the merchants' drawers were full of Polish currency, the zloty was devaluated to zero.

The local people tried to shop in the re-opened stores but the Russians had priority. They did not have to stand in the queues that ran for blocks. Interesting conversations were conducted -- in whispers - - by the citizenry during the long hours of waiting in line.

"It won't be long. Don't forget England and France promised to help Poland."

A few steps farther it sounded, "The English and French armies are already in Berlin."

Ten minutes later the Allies were approaching Warsaw. If a pessimist happened to stand in the line, the news went in the opposite direction. With no access to radios -- they had been confiscated - - every hearsay was accepted as truth or at least half-truth by the hard-for-news public.

A few days later the stores were empty. Goods that did not find takers for years, were sold. The Soviets bought everything and anything. They had loads and loads of rubles they were not able to spend in their own country.

Father worried about our future. We owned neither jewelry nor foreign currency, the main valuables at time of political upheaval. During World War I that problem had surfaced as result of frequent changes of occupying forces. The older generation had a good memory. Therefore a quick exchange of provisions, like food and other staples, took place between merchants and farmers soon after the communist takeover. Businessmen also traded wares with each other. We acquired yard goods for new clothes, dishes, soap, firewood and other necessities. Such activity was a crime in the eyes of the Soviets. It was called black marketing. They rearranged our lives in their image. Cars, radios, telephones, rental homes became government properties. A new god was introduced -- Stalin. Every time his name was mentioned during a political meeting (and every meeting was a political one), a thunder of applause had to arise. Secret eyes searched for idle hands.

For a long time we did not get any newspapers. When they finally arrived, even people who knew the Russian language did not want to read them because they contained only communist propaganda. The first page always carried pictures of prized cows, pigs and sheep followed by the names and photographs of their caretakers. The most productive workers in the mines, factories, and communal farms were honored the same way. These so-called *Stahanovtzy* received the same wages as the average workers. Fame and glory were their only reward. Harder work, greater ability, more effort or overtime did not count.

Later we became Soviet citizens not by choice but by annexation. Those who refused to accept the offer of citizenship went to Siberia.

By the grace of the government we were allowed to own our clothes, dishes, and other small innocent articles, but we had to share our homes, including furniture, with the newcomers, the civilian Russians. Every inch of extra space was considered a luxury and had to be given up. Hordes of Easterners embarked on Western Ukraine, the land of gold and honey, the land of opportunity. Most of them became heads of departments, but some settled for second- or third-rate jobs for the sake of entering the newly discovered

"America." This was another of our native jokes; for the Russians Western Ukraine represented what America meant to us, the local population, most of whom were poor and dreamt of going to America some day. But those who lived on the other side of the river Zbrucz were poorer yet. In their one-for-all outfits -- military shirts for men and cotton skirts and blouses for women -- they looked famished and wasted.

After the offices of the secret police and the Communist Party had been established, and after the poor had screamed loud enough about the lack of food, the government opened an office for the centralization of grain and produce from the region. This was the first local institution. The economy was run by the central government in Moscow but executed by state, region, and city management. Only the bank where I later worked was under direct Moscow rule.

Although membership in the pre-war communist party was not recognized, Ivan Keveluk who had spent time in a Polish concentration camp for political prisoners, managed to get himself appointed head of the most important economic institution, the co-operative of the city stores. The significance of the job was not based on prestige but finances.

Whoever controlled the flow of merchandise was an influential person, just below the chairmen of the party or secret police. Later, when some goods finally did show up in the stores, they vanished quickly into the hands of party members.

Keveluk was the son of a rich Greek Catholic farmer who owned an imposing house across the street from the ruins of the ancient castle. Offering nice dowries, he provided his two daughters with well educated, prestigious husbands. The parents and one married daughter lived in the mansion. But the only son, Ivan, who had married a poor girl against his parents' wishes, lived in a shack in the back yard and worked in the fields together with all the hired hands. According to gossips, the father's treatment drove the son into the ranks of the communist party.

Since the Soviets showed great aversion toward descendants of wealthy families, the population of Skalat was puzzled with the appointment.

Again, according to rumors, our daily cultural nourishment, papa Keveluk's pocketbook was cherished by the corruptive Soviet officials.

We faced an important problem -- to work for the Soviets or not to work. Those who did not work were suspected of black marketing. Those who did work were not able to make a living on their wages because everything had to be bought on the black market. These people had to supplement their wages with .. yes, black marketing or selling off their "riches" they owned from the previous years. The political communist machine was spinning its wheel speedily but the economic one was barely moving. The archive from the courthouse was trucked away to Tarnopol for further studies by the NKVD., but the shelves in the stores were empty most of the time. The private business places with their shuttered windows and boarded up doors stood as dead witnesses of a past era.

CHAPTER 5

Slowly Father began getting used to his quiet way of life. As busy as he was during his working years, he always found time for chats with friends, relatives, acquaintances and customers.

Michal Morozowicki was only a mediocre shoemaker who worked for not-so-fussy peasants. He would bring to Father all his personal and legal troubles. He was a devout Roman Catholic but his wife attended the Greek church. Unfortunately for Zonia Morozowicka she had only sons, four of them. In accordance with custom, they were raised in their father's religion. The family celebrated both holidays, the Roman and the Greek because of the general opinion "nobody knew which was older," but Zonia was hurting. She had to attend her church alone. Her only compensation was that the family used her language -- Russki. Friction happened often. They did not go to the priest. They came to my father. He was far from being a psychologist or lawyer but had a practical knowledge of the law and of the people, a fine penmanship and a good writing style although he was not very fluent in the Polish language. He was born an Austrian citizen and was better acquainted with German, the tongue of Austria, than with Polish. He wrote all kinds of applications, requests, appeals and bids for anyone who could not afford to pay as well as for friends and customers. Mother had to correct his grammar, so it actually was a dual project but the pseudo-law office was known under Father's name.

Mother, a modern, open-minded worldly woman, played the mother-role for some of my girl friends whose parents stayed behind on matters of social growth. Although she had only a seventh grade education, she had made herself into a scholar. She knew a little bit of everything from Aristotle to Spinoza and from Shakespeare to Tolstoy. She was as familiar with western European literature as with the Polish and Russian. We used to say that Mother ate books. And she did it nighttime because she helped in the store daytime. She never forced me to do housework. She knew I preferred reading. When I was about ten years old, her cousin Hasha criticized Mother for the way she was raising me.

"Books, books, and books," she would say. "That's all your Lusia knows. Look at my Gusta. She can cook, bake, clean, darn socks. She even made herself a skirt. And she's only one year older than your Lusia."

Mother did not like to be degraded. "What your Gusta knows," she said, "my Lusia will still learn, but what Lusia knows, Gusta will never learn."

Mother showed spunk when she had to. She had been raised in a city much bigger than Skalat and was not used to the unabashed curiosity of the gossipers for whom every newcomer was the object of inquisitiveness. She often told us stories about her first impression of the city of Skalat. As a young bride in 1912 she was talking to a friend in the street when one of those nosy persons, a middle-aged woman, stopped in front of Mother and stared at her with wide open eyes and mouth. Mother turned the other way. The woman followed her. Mother couldn't take it anymore. She gaped back the same way the stranger did, and asked, "Ha?" In daily language it meant, 'What do you want?'

Like many other stores, ours was located in the front room of the house which my great-grandfather had built after a fire had swept the Jewish quarter at the end of the 19th century. According to the elders of the city, the Jewish settlement of Skalat was about two hundred years old.

We worried about Father who had spent all of his life in business. Since private enterprise was forbidden under communism, Father would be unemployable. He would not learn a new occupation at the age of fifty-two. He was in poor health and had a hard time walking as a result of an old injury but he was not the kind of man to look out the window all day long. Both my parents were passionately independent, each in a different way. Father was completely wrapped up in making a living for the family, often disregarding his own safety. He traveled a great deal by horse and buggy -- Skalat was without railroad service for many years -- to find the right but cheap merchandise. Gentile youngsters liked to pelt the Jewish storekeepers returning home at night through the villages, with stones. We dealt mainly in leather skins and work shoes, but when Jozek got older, Father sent him to a specialist to learn the trade of stitching soft leather. Milo who was four years younger acquired that knowledge later from his brother. Using leather from the store, the boys produced upper parts for shoes and boots which we sold together with shoemakers' accessories. Maybe this was the reason my parents did not object to my tailoring. If a trade was good for the boys, it should have been good for the girl, too.

At the end of each year my parents would examine their books for income and losses. The list of uncollectable bills was always enormous.

"Look here," Mother would say. "Do you realize how rich we'd be if we had all that money that people owe us?"

She was a very practical person on problems of daily life but a dreamer on the subject of her children's future. She hoped for an education for us but that needed money, lots and lots of money. A precise and analytic soul, she envisioned her offsprings to live a comfortable life some day. Father was no dreamer. Besides attending the synagogue, reading the Bible, newspapers and periodicals, he was satisfied with just making a living. Mother called it existing. It was good enough for her, but -- in her opinion -- not for the future of her children.

Father's answer was always the same. "Do you know how many families will be saved from starvation this winter because of our losses?" He did not consider it losses. It was charity. Many poor people did not pay their bills. The loss could not be taken off the taxes as in some other countries because taxes in Poland were paid from the amount of merchandise bought regardless of sales or income. Father was not a fanatic and did not expect to sit to the right of the Almighty in the afterworld but he had compassion for those who were worse off than he.

Leibish Berger sold kosher food products from his wife's kitchen. He peddled them door-to-door. Although we did not care for Mrs. Berger's cooking or baking, we always bought something from her husband. It was a charity case because the Bergers were too proud to ask for handouts.

Leibish was an ultra-Orthodox Jew and believed that every word of the Torah was written in God's own hand.

"When times are bad," he would say, "it's a sign of the coming of Messiah. He is on his way. One of these days or weeks he'll be here." And from year to year it was 'one of these days or weeks.'

One day Father had enough of that and told him off.

"Winter's coming. Prepare yourself an attic full of firewood, a basement full of potatoes, a pantry full of flour, a jar full of butter, then you'll be strong enough to wait for the Messiah."

Many of our customers were poor cobblers with large families. Most Gentile shoemakers had a small piece of land under cultivation which brought an additional income but the impoverished Jews lived in the crowded part of the city where even weeds did not grow.

All commerce stayed in Jewish hands. In the 15th century a Polish king, Kazimir the Great, invited Jews from the West to settle in his country and teach his people commerce and trade. But they did not want to learn. Poland remained a farming country into in the twentieth century.

I finished my customers' work and paid up my helpers. When the merchandise was gone from my parents' store, we scrubbed the woodwork and floors, cleaned the windows, whitewashed the walls, and turned the room into a habitable place. I moved home. I had a room of my own.

CHAPTER 6

A stroll on the *corso*, the nicest and cleanest street, provided the best and cheapest entertainment in every city in Poland. It was our Times Square without the red-light district. Young people promenaded up and down, back and forth, looking each other over every evening and Sunday noon, meeting by chance or by choice, making new acquaintances and hearing the latest news. Nightclubs and cafes did not exist in Skalat. People also gathered in stores that sold ice cream, soda, chocolate and other sweets. Taverns were visited only by drunkards and restaurants only by out-of-towners or single men living alone. No man in his clear mind would learn how to cook, and if he did, he would keep it a secret to avoid becoming the laughingstock of the community.

On the first Saturday evening after the arrival of the Red Army I was getting ready for my promenade with friends when an out-of-breath young boy appeared at our door.

"There's a Russian soldier" he called out in a very loud voice, "looking for you. He's running around on the *corso* asking where Wolf Rothstein lives."

And here he was. Just walked in. A Soviet serviceman in full regalia -- military tunic, a rifle slung across his shoulder, a heavy leather belt from which a sheathed bayonet hung down. A good-looking young boy with light brown hair and dark brown deep-seated eyes, he smiled with a flashy glitter of snowy teeth. A crowd of curiosity seekers trailed him.

"I am Abrasha Waksman," he announced as if reporting to his commanding officer.

Father who was not a fast man because of his bad leg, jumped off his chair. "My nephew," he exclaimed in excitement. They locked arms in an embrace.

Father's sister had married a Jew from Russia before World War I. In those days it was easy to cross the border between Austrian Skalat and tsarist Russia. My aunt died of typhoid fever during the war leaving a husband and two small children. The Bolshevik revolution closed the borders cutting off family ties. Correspondence with foreign countries was considered by the Communists an anti-government act.

An annoying crowd peered in through the open windows. Mother explained to them who the soldier was and asked them to disperse. Some lingered on but most left to spread the sensational news, "A Russian soldier, a relative of a Jewish family right here in Skalat."

We talked for the next few hours. My uncle had remarried and Abrasha had now two stepsisters besides his older brother.

A few days later Father received a letter from his brother-in-law in Russia. It was a long applause for Father Stalin -- censorship was the rule of the land -- who saved them and now us from the clutches of capitalism and was providing us with such a wonderful democratic way of life. A postscript in tiny letters read, " Please help Abrasha get whatever he needs. He has money." And in large letters, "Long live Stalin."

Abrasha bought not only what he needed but also what he did not need. He would sell everything back home for much higher prices.

The Soviets used the phrase "Long live Stalin" the way the Christians say, "Praise the Lord," or the Jews "Blessed art Thou." The Nazis must have modeled the greeting of their god "Heil Hitler" after the communist fashion.

Now! The time has come. With a flesh and blood relative from the other side we expected to get to the bottom of that secret life in the Soviet Union. But we learned something else instead -- that the communist upbringing closed all the millions of lips in that country. Abrasha was not a member of the party, yet he wouldn't talk. The majority of the population did not belong to the party but they were all trained in silence and praise of the regime. My cousin was prodded, coaxed, pried and stimulated into confession but he only said, "Nobody runs around naked."

He was stationed not far from Skalat but he never revealed the exact place. His military truck was seen often in front of our house. He was constantly looking for something to buy. Father had connections among businessmen and Abrasha paid whether it was worth the price or not. Anything was better than rubles though he never said so. The oral publications of our natives reported that even closest relatives did not discuss politics or economics in the Soviet Union.

One day Abrasha brought a huge, heavy motorcycle and asked us to store it for him. Since we did not have any outbuildings, we had to store it in my bedroom where it would not be very visible. We had never seen a motorcycle from close-up and stared at it with the same awe we gaped at

Abrasha's shoulder weapon and revolver. A few weeks later he brought another cycle, a little smaller. Again, it was placed in my bedroom.

Our cousin used his cycles often for pleasure trips. Neither I nor my brothers went along though there was room for two. It was not acceptable for the local population to be seen in the company of a Russian soldier, and we could not hang up a sign, 'He's my cousin.' I would have loved such a ride. I tried to imagine what pleasure it would have been to race with the wind and the sun on my back, but even Father who had become greatly attached to his nephew, did not want to see any of us on a cycle with a Soviet soldier.

CHAPTER 7

Both my brothers and I could have taken advantage of our manual trades and joined a communal shop called *artel* where workers shared labor and dividends but had to bring their own equipment like machines and other tools which became the property of the *artel*. We were not anxious to do it but wanted to explore the possibility.

Jozek accompanied me to the tailor shop where a big middle-aged woman looked me over from head to toe.

"And what are you doing here?" she asked with a sarcastic smile on her lips. She knew who I was.

That icy greeting took me by surprise. "Just looking," I said.

The oranges on her dress were big enough to reflect the light of the sun, and the flaming red hair formed a frizzled crown around her head. With a twist of the corner of her lips and a thumb pointing in our direction she turned toward a young girl as if saying "Look who's here." The girl, a cute teen-ager, stretched out her hand armed with a pair of large scissors toward us.

"We don't need ladies here," she said. She had put a special accent on the word "ladies."

I was not welcome. I was ostracized. It was their world now, a class distinction in reverse. I think I turned into a snob on that day. I considered myself a liberal and it took the communist regime to convert me.

Those of the leather stichers and cobblers who took communism seriously had united into one shop, - *artel*, but few people were willing to join. In the end most did because of the exorbitantly high taxes imposed by the government on private enterprises.

Milo was the last in our family to think about work. He was only sixteen and rather on the unbridled side until not long ago. He was the only non-bookworm in our family.

Mother used to tell us she had to cajole me to play outdoors with other children when I was small because I preferred to stay indoors with my books. Six years later she had the same problem with Jozek. But she did not have that trouble with Milo. He reversed the situation. We never knew where he was. We had to look for him at mealtime, at Hebrew school time, at religious services time, and more than once he disappeared early in the morning before school time. When he was small, we often found him along the road spinning an old bicycle rim or a metal hoop that had held a barrel together. Or he would just sit on a fence kicking the boards with the heels of his shoes. When he got older, football became his passion. This was much better; at least we knew where to locate him. But once he learned the trade he settled down and was left with only one vice -- girls. I do not remember him ever being without a girlfriend. He was bursting with a surplus of energy and scattered some of it on us and his friends. He did not want to work for the communists. He stayed home, practiced his trade, and did much better financially than Jozek and I did later in our office jobs. He cheated the Soviets and got away with it. He neither joined the *artel* nor paid the tax. There was one catch -- he worked mostly for food not for cash, and he fed the family.

Jozek and I were still searching and contemplating when Milo, the youngest, had already made up his mind.

Our next door neighbor, Moses Bernstein, a widower, lived with his two young daughters in a modest three-room house. This was a luxury in the eyes of the Housing Department and they requisitioned one room for the director of the Produce Division, *tovarish* Podgornoy. He was a large, quiet man with a balding head, a nose in the shape of a light bulb, dark eyes that peered out from the crumpled eyelids like two raisins, and a friendly disposition. He was not a party number. He arrived in October in a brown corduroy suit and wore it through the winter and into the next summer until his local employees equipped him, for his money, with a new outfit. Jozek worked as a bookkeeper for Podgornoy who recognized in my brother the mathematical wizard. Jozek and his local co-workers got along with the Soviet boss because he was different from the rest of the Russians. He was an older man and probably remembered the tsarist times with another form of tyranny and another form of economy. He neither criticized nor praised the present regime but a glance from the corner of his eye, a shrug of his shoulder, a way of spreading his arms helplessly, allowed us to draw conclusions.

Bernstein's brother, Mordehay, was another of our neighbors. The three families had been close friends for years. After Podgornoy's wife arrived in "the new America," we and the Bernsteins invited them to tea often. *Tovarish* Podgornaya was a thin tall woman with sharp features and eyes that darted quickly from behind the steel-framed glasses. Her salt and pepper hair was cut short. Dressed in a cotton blouse and peasant style plaid skirt, she still had the carriage of a lady. She was a bit more daring than her husband, especially when she would throw in words like "the maid in my parents' house," indicating a bourgeois background. This was probably the reason her husband would not take bribes or shop on the black market as other Soviets did. They had to be very careful.

CHAPTER 8

Early in November Rozia burst into our house, gasping.

She plunged down into a chair, fidgeting and jiggling around. "What am I to do?" she asked. "They want me to be a teacher."

"Who are they?" I asked.

"As if you don't know. The Russkis, dummy," she answered.

I had not gotten it into my head that when the Russkis offered you a job, it was an order. Rozia had a year of Law School at the Jagiellonski University in Krakow and used to do a lot of tutoring. I thought she liked teaching.

She slackened and sat limply. "Ha! Ha! You haven't seen that kind of school. I went to a training session. It's all propaganda. No matter if it's arithmetic or geography, they turn every subject into communist indoctrination."

"How come they don't hire the same teachers, those from last year?" I asked.

She flung her arms into the air. "Are you crazy? The Polish teachers were government officials. Now they want the children to become good Soviet citizens, not Polish patriots. And now they're training kids, mere teen-agers with seven-grade schooling, and expect them to teach school next week. They probably will send for you..."

I did not let her finish the sentence. I had done some tutoring in my teen-age years but, no, thanks, this kind of teaching was not for me.

I was glad to see Rozia in a new role trying to make her own decision. She was usually easy going, waiting for something or somebody to propel her one way or the other. Now she wanted me to be her propeller but I would not take the responsibility.

The few hours in the archives with the NKVD taught me a lesson -- to look for a place where I would not have to deal with many Soviets. I knew that the bank had only one Russian employee, the director. I grabbed my coat, went there and was hired on the spot. *Tovarish* Volkowsky hardly asked any questions but gave me right away the title of secretary of the Federal Bank of the Soviet Union for the Skalat Region, or, as it was called in Russian, *rayon*. Every institution had the prefix *ray* which means in Polish paradise. There was the Ray Communist Party, the Ray Agricultural Department, the Ray Health Office and so on. We had established ourselves in the Soviet paradise.

The bank occupied part of a large, modern building that had served as the seat of the Polish county administration and private quarters of the *starosta*, the head of the county. The Soviet officials did not crowd themselves in their working places; they crowded only the civilian population. I shared a room with a typist, a young local woman who tried desperately to cope with the Cyrillic typewriter. We all were familiar with these letters because the Ukrainians used them and the public schools had taught them in grades third through seventh. But pani Lola Waltuchova who was used to a Polish typewriter, could master neither the strange machine nor the new language. The bank was a federal institution and all correspondence was conducted in Russian. Regional offices received their instructions from Kiev, the capital of the Ukraine, in the Ukrainian language.

I was bored, bored, bored. My job was to open the mail once a day and put it on the director's desk. The mail consisted of printed circulars and typed letters. There was little difference between Russian and Ukrainian and I soon learned the new language with the help of a grammar book.

I learned to use the ancient typewriter and did all of pani Waltuchova's work. She was a nice person but cut out of wood. Her movements were stiff as if set in motion by pushing a button, and so was her thinking. I tried to chat but she seldom ventured beyond 'yes' or 'no.' I was still bored for lack of work. Once a month I did the treasurer's chore; I put together the payroll. I could not walk around and talk to the bookkeepers because they were the hard working people. Most of them were inexperienced boys and girls who had never done any office work, and very often they stayed until midnight looking for a lost *kopeck* to balance the daily budget. The common joke was, 'Add your own *kopeck* and go home.'

Volkowsky, the director, was a thin tall man with a face like a dried apple. Judging by his wrinkles, he could have been a hundred years old. He drank a lot and ate a little. He walked with a stride waving his arms like a soldier, carried his back straight like a soldier, and, like a soldier on duty guard, never smiled. He and the chairman of the *Rayparkom* (regional party committee), Zinchenko, huddled often in the director's office for reasons that became clear to us only weeks later. For the time being we wondered about these conferences because the two men were not friends socially. The rough unpolished Volkowsky knew nothing besides banking and party matters while Zinchenko was a knowledgeable man of polite manners. Our director's voice would turn into thunder when he heard us speaking Polish. We were supposed to call each other 'tovarish' but, to Volkowsky's dismay, we never did.

"This is the Ukraine," he stressed again and again, "and only the Ukrainian language should be used here." He did not win.

The local head bookkeeper was demoted and her place was taken by a woman from the East. Ksenia was a quiet girl, thin as a skeleton, shy and withdrawn. Not one of the typical Russians I had met so far. She wore a navy blue coat which she never took off. Volkoswky also kept his overcoat on in the office but he never stayed long enough to get overheated. Most Russians sat in their offices with their coats on, out of habit; there was always a shortage of fuel in their country.

One of my distant relatives, Milko Rothstein, still lived in this three-room apartment with his wife and child. Volkowksy, who could not understand why a six-year-old boy needed a room of his own or why a married couple needed two beds, expropriated one room for Ksenia. She, a sensitive person and not a party member, did not feel comfortable about living in a 'confiscated' room and soon found herself another place. Milko never recovered his room or bed because another Russian moved in but he was not sorry about the loss. He made many good deals with Volkowsky, the influential party member. As maintenance man for the bank he became the director's confidant. The job proved very profitable for both. It gave Milko a foot in a door where important commodities were handled. Volkowsky and Milko formed a perfect partnership: a shrewd communist and a smart businessman. Milko was able to get most anything, nominally for the bank yet not used by the bank. But he was not able to find writing paper. Our letters and reports to the headquarters in Moscow were always written on the reverse side of their own correspondence. During the entire Soviet occupation I never saw a sheet of paper empty on both sides.

A new department was opened in the bank, a credit bureau. A Soviet economist, Blachman, headed the office. A few days later Volkowsky hired a refugee, a Jewish lawyer who had left his family in Poland, as a credit inspector.

About that time the Stegers paid me a visit. Anxiety was written all over their faces. Mayer Feldman had been arrested and taken to Tarnopol. His wife went there to look for him but the authorities would not even tell her where he was held. In spite of their worries, the Stegers were well groomed and nicely dressed. They did not seem to suffer great shortages. They must have come with money and were able to buy secondhand but good clothes. She wore a grey woolen suit, black pumps, even a hat, something local women had discarded as a sign of bourgeoisie and replaced with babushkas. Looking rich could have been dangerous, and I told them so.

Mother served tea, home-made crackers, and jam. Inge still believed that the war would end soon and they would be able to go back to either Germany or Poland where her parents lived. But Kurt wavered. He knew that the Soviets suspected the unemployed, especially the strangers, of subversion and black marketing, and he decided to look for a job. To my surprise he confessed that he had been a member of the communist party years ago. He hoped to get preference from the communists on that basis.

"Don't fool yourself," I told him. "They don't trust anybody, not even the local communists who probably have more proof than you."

Kurt quickly placed the glass of tea he was cradling in his hand on the table and pulled out a piece of paper from his breast pocket. "Here it is. Number, date, place, even the name of the person who registered me."

I was shocked. "You mean... Don't tell me that you carried this with you all those years..."

" No. No. I'm not that stupid. I memorized it and wrote it down," he said. "After all, the Interkom was an international organization. They must have a membership list in Moscow. I even went to Zinchenko and talked about it."

'What guts,' I thought. And I had considered him a weakling. Our local people stayed away from the party as far as they could. Not that Zinchenko, the chairman of the communist party, was a terror. Nobody wanted to know whether he was or was not. The party was very unpopular with the local population. Zinchenko, like Zubchenko, the head of the NKVD, made a good first impression. They and their wives had veneer. Those were the only two Soviet couples who could -- if not for their clothes -- pass for Europeans. The chairman of the NKVD was always in uniform and the party chairman wore always black, charcoal grey or navy blue. Light colors, as if forbidden by law, were never seen on any Russian. Both men had good looking wives who, considering conditions, were well dressed.

"And...What did Zinchenko say?" I asked.

"That he would think about it," answered Kurt. "He would let me know. He was very friendly and said he wished more local people would come to see him."

"How did he talk to you? Does he speak German?"

"No. But he found somebody who does."

"In uniform?"

"Yes."

"With a blue stripe on the cap?"

"That's right. But why do you ask?"

I did not want to tell him that the blue-striped men were the NKVD. "Just curiosity," I said. "I think it would be safer if you took a job."

I told him about the refugee who spoke neither Russian nor Ukrainian, yet was hired as a bank inspector.

The next day Volkowsky bestowed on Kurt Steger the title of inspector-economist for commerce and industry. The other refugee whose name I do not remember, carried the title of inspector of agronomy. I was sure Blachman, the head economist, would train them in their new profession. A week past, and another. All the two newcomers did was entertain each other in a mixture of Polish and German. Blachman seemed busy with the initial tasks of organizing the department. Little did we know that the director, the faithful party member, kept a watchful eye on the two strangers.

The mysteries of Zinchenko's visits to Volkowsky's office were cleared up when we were ordered by the party to write our biographies. We had to answer a slew of questions. One of them was, "Do you have relatives in any foreign country and where?" Most of us did have such compromising kinfolk and we all disowned them. Contact with people from across the border, especially America, was a crime.

Besides constant fear, economic shortages, and civic depravations, we suffered two more exclusively Russian plagues -- public meetings and classes on communism. The presence of every employee was required during long boring speeches delivered, summer or winter, in the city park, by preachers of the new religion, communism. Clapping hands was a 'must' at the mere mention of the name 'Father Stalin.' The absentees were considered enemies of the state.

About the end of 1940 the Soviets annexed the occupied land and we became part of the communist Ukraine. Passports -- identification papers not valid for foreign travel -- were issued to the local population. Those who did not accept the passports were sent to Siberia.

A passport could represent an aid or a hindrance in the future because it revealed the family background. My father's passport said: ex-businessman. This was the biggest degradation. Mother was wife of ex-businessman. Also a shameful title. I was the daughter of an ex-businessman. If I had not been already employed to the satisfaction of my boss, I probably would have been in trouble. That I was a trained seamstress and thus should have been classified as a working woman, was not mentioned. But my brothers who after learning the trade never worked in any other place but in the store, were listed as working class men. This was the Soviet order.

CHAPTER 9

Winter arrived in full glory. Frost sculptured fancy designs on the windowpanes, and many people shivered in unheated homes. The natives complained to the local activists and they in turn carried the protest to Zinchenko. He took a stroll through the city and noticed a few garlands of smoke curling up into the cold air from some chimneys. He dismissed the case with an offhand gesture.

"Those who have wood," he declared, "must share with the others."

Coal was never mentioned. It was as if it did not exist any place in the world. Some people tried to talk to Zinchenko but he was as cold as a block of ice. He did not raise his voice. Neither did he offend anyone. In my mind I compared him to Zubchenko, the head of the NKVD. I was sure they had attended the same political academy. They reminded me of European blue-bloods who were not supposed to show their emotions in public. The Communist Party and the NKVD had become the Soviet royalty. The social scale had been tipped over.

One cold morning both our new inspectors did not show up for work. Bank employees became restless. Did they both get sick on the same day? We knew that the problem of passports lay heavily on the minds of most refugees. They had families in the West and were not eager to become Soviet citizens. As such they would never be able to leave the country.

Volkowsky who was always late, arrived even later than usual on that day. Passing by my desk he called out my name in a very loud voice. The Russians called each other by the first and paternal names but the locals had only surnames. Volkowsky was Aleksy Andreyevitch but I was Rothstein. I followed him to his office. The top of his huge desk was clear of any papers. Although he knew banking well, all he did was put his signature on checks and other documents prepared by the employees under the supervision of Ksenia and Blachman. The director's priorities lay with the party not with the bank.

"You're taking over the position of economist on business and industry," he said not looking at me but at the closed door of the inspectors' room to my left.

I was petrified. My feet were glued to the wooden floor. I understood everything. The Stegers and the lawyer had not accepted the passports and were now on the way to Siberia. Volkowsky had kept on eye on them until the party issued the call.

The director turned his furrowed face toward me. "Go in. You start right now."

Thick snowflakes whirled around me on the way home for lunch. My head whirled, too. I did not have to announce the news to my family. The whole city talked about last night's deportation. Everything had been well prepared and organized. About midnight the surprised victims were taken out of their beds, allowed to pack one suitcase or bundle per person, and driven in horse-drawn sleds to the railroad station. Besides the refugees, the group included the families of men who had fled the country or had been arrested, and all the colonists - the Poles whom the former government had brought from the West in the twenties and thirties to replenish the Polish population. Now Eastern Poland was de-Polonized and Siberia colonized with Poles.

Esther Feldman escaped the transport. She could not be found on that fatal night and she was never arrested. There was no doubt in my mind that Inge was gone also. The party and NKVD were "gentle" people. They did not separate families in the concentration camps of Siberia.

As credit inspector I had to check the credit worthiness of the institutions who applied for loans. My duties also included planning. I was supposed to estimate how much cash would flow in from the city and country stores every week, month and year. Cash was a delicate commodity. The general population was allowed to spend it in the stores and on the open farmers' markets, but the stores' management had to deliver it to the bank at the end of each day. An armed NKVD man traveled around the region daily to collect the cash from the village stores. Our bank dealt only with institutions. No individuals had accounts in the bank.

On the way to and from work I had to pass the marketplace which used to pulsate with business, and, during fairs, with entertainment. Now it stood empty, neglected, forgotten. In the mid twenties the city had built a block of wooden stores in the center of the plaza. They looked now like apparitions from a different world. The dark shingled roofs drooped in mourning and resembled a cemetery. The economy of our city was buried there, in the marketplace. This was the grave of our freedom.

In the inspection department I was not bored anymore. I knew about Soviet style of business and industry as much as I knew about life on the moon but Blachman was a good teacher and I made progress. Sometimes I covered my ignorance by pretending to know and it usually worked because most of my clients -- local people -- had not grasped the meaning of their jobs any better than I did mine. What saved me was my quick adjustment to the Russian language. While idling at my secretarial job and reading directives from Moscow, I became familiar with words and idioms and, what was most important, with the banking language. After a few months I spoke and wrote Russian although the promised dictionary never arrived. I typed my own letters to Moscow. The work was easy but I felt uneasy. I remembered that the director never criticized the two previous inspectors for doing nothing and I was afraid he might have some plans for me. I had a bad passport; I was a daughter of an ex-businessman. As time went on, my suspicion proved without base.

Since our bank was the only one in the region, I had to travel to outlying cities, Podwolocyzsk and Grzymalow, and all the villages around to check the worth and quality of their merchandise in order to decide whether they deserved credit. For the same purpose I had to examine their books and inventories, an area completely unfamiliar to me. I knew nothing about merchandise. I could not tell the difference between white wheat flour and rye flour, between oat grain and barley grain, could not understand why a mountain of salt was dumped outdoors where it was exposed to the elements, and why stacks of grain were rotting in the fields during the winter. The orders from Moscow called for leniency, so I granted loans right and left and let "them" worry about payments. I did it by intuition and I soon discovered by experience that I was right. In the name of progress the central government gave loans to state enterprises without regard to accountability.

The bank owned a car and paid a driver who did nothing when he did not drive. Most of the time the car was incapacitated. Either the spare parts had not arrived or the chauffeur did not know how to use them. When the car was in running condition, it was used by Volkowsky's wife and their five children who loved to travel in an automobile. I gave up; I had to go by horse and buggy.

One cold day the director asked me to go to Podwoloczysk in an open sleigh. At that time I already felt secure in my job.

"I can't go," I said. "I don't have a *shooba*."

A *shooba* was a big heavy overcoat used for winter travel. At first he did not answer. A few minutes later he opened the door to my room and exclaimed in a very nasty tone of voice, "You own more clothes than the director." He slammed the door with such a bang that it reverberated through the whole office. He did not hide his envy. He had arrived from Russia in a *rubashka* and *kufayka* (quilted jacket) just as most other Soviets. And he wore those clothes until Milko furnished him with an outfit more suitable for a bank director.

I never surrendered on the subject of winter travel. It became Milko's task to provide me with a *shooba* which he used to borrow from another department.

With spring approaching, the party began organizing communal farms in spite of the farmers' objections. But there was no wide-spread opposition. The peasants knew what had happened to the *kulaks* (rich farmers) in the East in the thirties when millions of resisters were killed. Blachman had hoped to bring his wife, a bank inspector, to work with him in Skalat but the director beat him to it assigning the job to his own seventeen-year-old nephew. The short, stout Fyodor Pavlowicz was married, had a face full of festering pimples, a hollow expression in the slits of his eyes, and a pair of donkey ears. He was so bashful that his answers were always 'yes' or 'no.' Sometimes he shook his head up and down or sideways. He knew about agriculture as much as I knew about commerce and industry before I began my Soviet career. He never learned. Blachman tried to teach him; after all, the boy was Volkowsky's sister's son. But he did not possess any capacity for learning. Finally Blachman lost his patience and conducted the farmers' matters himself while Fyodor sat at his desk staring at the ceiling.

It was before Christmas 1940. I had just returned from taking stock of a country store with a very small inventory. At that time a kilo of sugar was 300 rubles on the black market which was more than a bookkeeper earned in a month at the bank. I mentioned to Blachman, my superior, the absence of sugar in the stores at a time when it was in greatest demand. Even the poorest peasants used to buy sugar for the holidays.

"Sugar is not of primary necessity," he said. "There's fruit, sugar beets ..."

As if stores carried fruit! It had to be bought from farmers at inflated prices. And sugar beets -- nobody ate them though they grew in the county. They were shipped out. I didn't know where to. Maybe for the underground market where sugar was always in good supply. I did not want to argue but something inside me forced me to become daring. I did not expect Blachman to denounce me. Not because he was Jewish -- he did not take any pride in his Jewishness; he was a Russian -- but because he was not political and did not preach communism. We never had arguments about work. He knew his profession and I respected his opinion. My heart was not in the job and I did not care about details. I was dreaming about the end of the war and the end of communist slavery.

"People need other staples," I said. "Not only food. They need clothes, heat, footwear."

He flashed his big green eyes. "What did you people gain?" he asked, "with your bellies full of ice cream and closets full of stylish clothes? You don't even have a country. And look where we are. A mighty army, and the world must respect us. Military power, that's what makes a country, not sugar and fancy hats."

I did not believe he was sincere. I never raised the subject again.

CHAPTER 10

At the beginning of the first winter Volkoswky topped our misery with a 'no Sunday, no holiday rule.' Instead of a six-day workweek he ordered a ten-day work period followed by a day of rest. He claimed it was an order from Moscow and pertained to all federal institutions. The bank was the only one of that kind in the city.

A murmur of protest rose from the usually subdued bank employees.

Magda, one of our bookkeepers, was the daughter of the local Greek Catholic priest, and had never missed a Sunday mass. She had been a frolicking young lady with a gleeful disposition, glistening eyes, and a smile that just about took up her whole face. But since the beginning of the occupation that face showed only grief and despair because she, like the rest of her family, worried about their lives in the godless society. For her sake as well as for ours we decided to rebel -- rebel against a Soviet order.

We needed a meeting place to work out a plan. It would have been suspicious to meet in a private house. Magda offered the church.

It was still dark when we mingled with worshippers on their way to early mass. Luckily for us it was bitter cold. I raised the collar of my coat as high as I could and wrapped my head and my face in a woolen scarf. Only my eyes were exposed. Everybody was running and nobody knew who was who. Following Magda's instruction, we entered the church through a side door and went down to the basement.

Two candles flickered on the table. The rest of the room was enveloped in shadows. Electric lights would have given us away. Stefan who used to be a union steward, conducted the meeting. His turned-up whiskers reached from ear-to-ear and accentuated the square, jutted out chin.

"Damn it," he began. "Years ago, when we did not agree with the boss, you know what we did?"

"You went on strike," I tried to guess.

"No. Not right away. First we sent a petition."

"No! No petition" Wanda, the new secretary, interrupted sharply. I was surprised to see her at the meeting. She was so chickenhearted that the mere sight of a

Russian put her in a frenzy. "Sending petitions is surely out of question. We'll all go to jail or...or...maybe even to Siberia."

Stefan kept on talking as if he did not hear her. "If the petition did not work we would try negotiations. But since we do not have a union, we must depend on a strong petition."

"A petition? To whom? That barbarian Volkowsky? And who'd dare to deliver it to him?" asked a voice from a dark corner.

"That's right. Who'd go to him?" someone repeated.

Silence. A minute passed. And another minute. And another. From the back of the room rose a low-key utterance.

"Never mind. You just write. I'll deliver."

All the heads turned in that direction. It was Jan Burak, the oldest and loneliest man in the office. A man without family or friends. He was a quiet, timid, meek person who kept to himself. He spoke only when addressed directly and answered in a shaky, unsteady whisper. I asked him later why he volunteered.

"Oh... I... I don't have much to lose. I'm alone," he answered.

At eight o'clock the counters on our abacuses jingled as loud as on any other day. My head was spinning and my mind was dark. I could not concentrate on my work. I was thinking about the petition. "We would work overtime, nighttime, anytime but Sunday." What's the use? We worked overtime and nighttime anyway, especially the bookkeepers, but never received any extra pay.

I wanted to be where the action would take place and sat down at the typewriter -- there was only one for the whole bank -- pretending to dash off some papers. From that point I was able to see everybody besides the cashier whom we did not include in our scheme because we suspected him of being a ~~stooge.~~ snoop I watched Burak who had often puzzled me as a brooding, impenetrable man. True, I hardly knew him. Neither by words nor by deeds did he ever reveal himself. Was it because he was strong enough to be his own man or was it just the opposite -- because he did not have the courage to face us, the world? In his loneliness we probably constituted his world.

The boss, as usual, was late. A long line of clients waited at his door because no institution could transfer deposits without his signature. Neither were they allowed to use cash. The crowd, many of them from out-of-town, were getting paid for a day's work while idling around in the bank. But nobody dared to complain. Volkowsky was an important member of the Communist Party.

Private citizens could not use the bank. Their nest-eggs, if they had any, were to be deposited in a savings institution, but I never heard of anyone doing so.

I was getting impatient. Maybe he drank too much and would not come today. He always smelled of alcohol but was never drunk. Finally the door flew open and the storm flew in. This was his customary entrance. He was all dressed-up in his unbuttoned western style overcoat. He liked to show off his striped suit, shirt and tie. His clothes contrasted distinctly with his bulky fur hat and the Russian *valenki* (felt boots) that could be a blessing on dry cold days and a curse on wet ones.

Without a glance at either side, without the friendly *Zdrastvooyte* so common on the Russian scene, he reached his door and began taking care of the waiting clients.

I looked at Jan. He worked his abacus so hard that the whole frame shook but I knew his mind was not on the numbers. His fingers wriggled like the legs of a spider spinning a web, his forehead shone with perspiration, and he glimpsed anxiously at the director's door.

I looked at Wanda. She was the only one not to sign the petition but she seemed to be on the train to Siberia already. Her eyeballs rolled and her mouth twisted like an epileptic's. I looked at the rest of my co-workers. I saw tense faces with tight lips. My muscles were so taut that I could hardly breathe. The air was full of suspense.

When Volkowsky's last client left, Jan stirred in his chair. He rose slowly, very slowly from his seat, but once on his feet, he was not the same man. After the first awkward step he proceeded with dignity. In front of the director's office he raised his right hand as if ready to knock but suddenly changed his mind and opened the door rapidly. Most probably he recalled that Volkowsky frowned at such western trifles as knocking at doors or tipping hats. As for western clothes and good food, that was fine with him. It was convenient.

As soon as he heard the door open, the boss leaped at Jan. "*Shto takoye*?" he barked. "What's going on?"

"*Tovarish* Superior," said Jan in a loud strong voice. "Please read this."

"What is it?"

"A petition."

"A what?"

"A petition," Jan repeated a shade louder.

"A petition from whom?" Volkowsky's tone was also turned up.

"From us, the employees."

The superior's face, including his bulging eyes, became inflamed. He grabbed the sheet of paper and glanced at the lines.

"Aha! You want us to use the methods of the capitalists. But we do not exploit our people with such Amerikanski inventions as overtime and piecework. In our democratic country such tricks are forbidden. Forbidden!" he roared. "*Poneemayte*? Of course you understand." He dropped the paper to the floor and moved closer to Jan who did not budge. "Petition refused." His wrinkled chin trembled and the nostrils of his bulbous nose opened like two abysses ready to swallow the victim. "This is treason," he boomed. "I'll show you... I'll..." Anger choked him.

Jan picked up the paper from the floor. "We're not coming to work on Sunday," he said.

"Just try," screamed the director an slammed the door.

Jan's face was just as red as the director's. He strutted back to his seat with his head high in the air.

Wanda's head was almost on her chest. I thought she was ready to crawl under the desk. Most other faces asked 'What now?'

Sunday came and nobody worked. According to hearsay Wanda tried but the bank was closed. Monday came and nothing happened. Another week passed, and another. Things remained quiet. Then rumors began circulating. It was underground talk and we swallowed it with our daily bread. News had seeped to us from Lvov that the Soviet Union tried to make advances toward the United States hoping for economic help. But America protested the annexation of eastern Poland and demanded better treatment of the local population before considering any closer ties with the communists. We assumed America saved our Sundays.

CHAPTER 11

Living conditions did not improve during the summer of 1940 or the following winter. Electric bulbs and flashlights, needles for sewing machines and other such basic commodities appeared once in a while on the black market -- never in the stores -- then vanished for a long time. One had to have a special instinct, a kind of survival gene, to stock up on the merchandise when it was available. But people could not afford to hoard. Like most people we lived from day to day on hope and prayers. We had at least the satisfaction that the feared religious persecution did not materialize. Churches and synagogues operated the old-fashioned established way.

Our interest in the war was great but we received little information. According to underground rumors, Hitler was on the winning path and Jews were suffering but we did not know any details. The Soviet newspapers hardly ever mentioned the war in the West.

At the end of 1940 the nice senior bookkeeper, Ksenia, was sent home. I knew her only slightly but she was well liked by her staff. In her own quiet way she often took the side of a subordinate against complaining Russian clients or even against Volkowsky for whom she showed little affection. We suspected he had a hand in her dismissal. Maybe she was not active enough in the 'Red Corner' or had committed some other political sin.

Her successor was not any more 'red' than she was. He came from one of the southern states in the Soviet Union where the winter was mild and the summer hot. He arrived in the middle of December in a lightweight coat, a flat round multi-colored cap and a pair of tarpaulin shoes. He left in June in the same outfit. He was courteous, well mannered, got along with most everybody, never asked for anything and never acquired anything. The western luxuries passed him by.

Both these bookkeepers as well as the Podgornoys made me realize that the Soviet Union, like any other country, was comprised of different people, good and bad, straight and crooked, polite and rude, shrewd and simple, smart and stupid. Then why couldn't we, the local population, warm up to those other human beings who had the same kind of virtues and flaws as we. Was it because their regimented training contrasted with our individual upbringing? Just as the economy was centralized, so were the schools, uniformed already at the cradle. Infants were cared for at a *Detski Yaslo* starting at the age of two weeks.

Some of the Soviet people, like Volkowsky and one of the two NKVD money collectors, suffered from a complete lack of civilization. In public they behaved as if they were alone in the middle of a desert. They spat sending their saliva a mile into the air, and did the same with the contents of their noses by pressing on their nostrils with their bare fingers. Their voices were loud and uncontrolled even when they didn't plan to yell.

These were the individuals whom the communist revolution had chosen from the poorest, uneducated ranks to govern the country. Life had changed for them so quickly that there was no time for behavioral lessons. Years later Khrushchev represented that group by pounding the United Nations' desk with his shoe.

In April 1941 some young men, among them my brother Jozek, received notices of induction into the Red Army. There had been no hint in the Soviet press of a possibility of war. The transport left on May 9. Jozek, stationed on the Latvian border in the northeastern part of the Soviet

Union, wrote often and never complained. He was not a grumbler and did not want to worry us but we were disturbed just by the thought of the training in the Red Army. We did not imagine that it might become worse.

About the same time the bank management changed hands. It was not known whether Volkowsky was dismissed, promoted or transferred, but a new director established himself behind the big beautiful desk a few weeks before Hitler attacked the Soviet Union. The employees hoped for an improved relationship with the administration.

Tall, well built, not undernourished, the new boss in his blue suit, shirt and tie, made a good impression on the bank employees. He was a big city person; he came from Moscow. No *roobashka*. No *koofayka*. Neither gym shoes nor high boots. He wore low black shoes, polished to perfection. It didn't take long to get to know him. He was cut from the party's and NKVD's fabric, polite on the outside, straight-laced and arrogant on the inside. The turned-up corners of his mouth and the permanent smirk on his lips hinted at a mild-mannered man but it was a deceiving connotation. The faint smile was not fake. He was probably born with it. Even when he was angry, the simper stayed on his face as if pasted on.

His daily schedule differentiated completely from Volkowsky's. He worked. He stayed behind his desk and peeked into everybody else's papers very often. He knew his profession and our limits. He was a perfectionist and expected the same from us. He had brought along his wife. A daughter and son-in-law, a bank inspector, were to follow. I smelled bad air for myself. I was the only non-Soviet economist and the highest ranking local employee. After a series of checks, audits and reviews, director Kovalenko let us know that each of us had to deliver an oral report on his or her accomplishments for the past year. I, a planner, had also to reveal my projects for the next year. By then I was already well acquainted with my profession. I prepared not only a lengthy report but also a list of recommendations for changes and delivered it in Russian at a meeting of all bank employees. More than a week passed, and I did not hear anything from the boss. No complaints and no compliments.

Early Sunday morning, June 22, 1941, two soldiers knocked at our door. They showed us a written order to requisition Abrasha's motorcycles and informed us that Hitler had attacked the Soviet Union all along the eastern border. Soldiers drew attention. In spite of the early hour, a crowd formed momentarily in front of our house. Some people knew already about the outbreak of the war. From that moment on until the entrance of the German army most Jews spent their days in the streets discussing the political and military situation, expressing opinions, making comments, asking for news and fearing, fearing.

The soldiers of the unprepared Red Army were fleeing like birds from a burning forest. Monday, the 30th, Kovalenko, the new director, announced that Wednesday the Soviets would be leaving the city and would take along any employee, including his family, but only with one small suitcase. Other directors did the same. Some Jews took them up on the offer but not many. My friend Rozia who had gotten married during the occupation, escaped with her husband. They had no possessions and were therefore easy travelers. They never came back. The Germans marched faster than the refugees. As in September of 1939, Jewish hearts froze again.

Father was against fleeing. I will never forget his words.

"We'll suffer. We'll be persecuted. We have survived many persecutions. We are Jews. But it's not the Middle Ages. Germans are a civilized people."

Mother agreed with him. They did not foresee that he would be one of the first victims. What troubled us mostly was the separation from Jozek. As Father said, "At best, we'll be cut off from him."

"You don't leave a home," Mother said, "and everything you worked for, and just run. To be a refugee means to be a beggar. You never know where you'd spend the next night."

This was the mentality of most Jews. There was nothing else to do but to watch the mournful exit of the remnants of the Soviet regime.

The bulk of the Red Army did not return by way of Skalat. There was no heavy machinery. No infantry men marching day and night as in 1939. Only some displaced troops and civilians who had worked in the city and county. Most of the front line soldiers became captives of the Germans.

Shoulder-to-shoulder people lined both sides of the street as if waiting to see a parade. Down the road a cloud of dust rose from under the wheels and hooves that rumbled over the potholes formed two years earlier by the entering tanks. Heavily loaded trucks swayed and rattled jolting together the passengers and the loot they had accumulated during the time of the occupancy. Polish Fiats -- assembled in Poland from Italian parts, and Czech Skodas plodded up the hill. Motorcycles groaned and croaked. Frightened requisitioned horses aimed their farm wagons in all directions but straight ahead. The men on horseback were jolted and bounced by the leaping, rearing, lunging beasts that tried to dislodge the unwelcome riders. The coachman

Rubin's dilapidated fiacre that used to carry guests to and from weddings, closed the convoy.

These were the last of the cruel communists and we did not realize how much we would miss them.

Wednesday afternoon. No city government. No police. Nobody to order darkened windows. It was no-man's land. The decent Gentiles stayed in their homes. The hooligans threatened the Jews but nothing substantial happened. Many Jews with pounding hearts and jarred souls gathered in the streets and talked and talked.

Father divided our meager valuables into four parts and gave each of us a little bag to wear on a string around the neck in case of an emergency. We had two watches, two pairs of earrings, a few rings, and some broken pieces of metal we didn't know what they were.

CHAPTER 12

It was Friday evening, the Jewish Sabbath. The first shots rang out and the first victims fell. It was easy confrontation and easy aim; Jews were going home from services. It was the fourth of July. The day did not mean anything to me at that time but years later I realized that the citizens of the United States celebrated their Independence Day with parades, picnics, and other parties on that same day. I did not foresee that some day I would do the same -- have fun while others suffer.

By Saturday morning it was quiet in our neighborhood. Father and Milo were getting ready to go to the synagogue. Suddenly there was a knock on the window. Kornel Kuchtiak, one of our most trusted customers, came to warn us.

"I can't believe..." he said. "No. I saw it and I still can't believe." He noticed Father and Milo dressed up. "Take off those clothes!" he yelled. "You go no place! They're killing Jews in the streets. Just gun them down like rabbits in the fields."

Kornel had been a prankster and a drunkard and villain in his younger years. Hardly a brawl or fracas in the city went by without his participation. He spent time in jail for blinding his best friend in one eye. But when he was sober, he was a gentleman, polite and friendly. And always paid his bills on time -- a rare virtue in those days. At the age of forty he married a much younger girl and became a different man. As if the bottle never had any meaning in his life.

It was hard for us to grasp what he was saying. But we knew he was not lying.

"Don't get out of the house," he repeated. "And I'm going home, too."

I was sure he would not stay home on a day like that. Although no fighter anymore, he would not miss any unusual event. Of dark complexion, he was mistaken for a Jew or gypsy more than once. He had a boundless curiosity and had to see everything, hear everything and retell. All through the German occupation he kept us informed about happening and rumors.

A few minutes after he left a neighbor girl let us know that the Germans guided by Ukrainian youngsters were going door-to-door taking out Jewish men, supposedly for work. Father and Milo put on good sturdy clothes in case they would be sent to a labor camp. We could not think of a better hiding place than the basement, and that's where they went.

A German soldier surrounded by Ukrainian urchins yelling '*Yood*' (Jew), appeared at the door step.

"We need men for work," he said.

"There're no men in this house," Mother answered.

The soldier and the boys did not share a common language but they understood each other perfectly. Hate, just as love, is a binding substance. Mother and I were standing on the cellar door that formed part of the floor of the back hall. The soldier pushed us to the side and turned toward the boys. His head and hand pointed to the trap door. With glee in his face a teen-ager grabbed the handle, tore the door open and went down the dark steps. Another boy followed him. With a gesture of victory the older boy delivered my father and my young brother to the German. The Nazi triumphed; he captured two enemies.

"Where are you taking them?" asked Mother.

There was no answer. We followed our men, just as other women did, to the edge of the marketplace, but were driven back by soldiers.

After two years of silence, the center of the city came to life, not with commerce but with Jewish suffering. Some men were ordered to crawl on all fours, pick pebbles with their mouths and drop them into containers. If they could not do it, they were beaten. Others had to pull young trees out of the ground with their bare hands. A prominent lawyer, Dr. Fried, was pushed into a public toilet and shot. "A rabbi, a rabbi," the soldiers kept calling. They wanted a rabbi for a sacrifice. A hoodlum brought a substitute, almost as good as a rabbi: a cantor, a man who was chanting the prayers in the synagogue. The helpers, the Ukrainians, tore off the man's shirt, made him lay in the trough under the water pump in the center of the city square, covered him with gravel stones, filled his mouth with pebbles so it stayed open, and pumped water onto his face until he died. They gave the same treatment to Leib Jawer who with his tall straight figure and patriarchal silver beard looked more like a statesman than a small city merchant. While some of the rowdies pumped water, others broke Jawer's legs. When he begged to be killed, voices from the crowd yelled, "Not yet, not yet. Let him die on his own."

Finally the soldiers found a Gentile who knew where one of our two rabbis lived. He was thrown down to the street from the attic window and died of a broken neck.

Another man was tied to the tail of a horse and died when the animal was driven into a gallop.

At midday Milo returned. He was barefoot, wearing only his pants. He had not seen Father. They had been separated. Milo was lucky. He had not been beaten, only harassed and robbed. He had to carry water from the pump and wash the same truck over and over again until it shone. The soldier for whom he worked took away his clothes and when he turned around to hide them, Milo was able to slip away. He was only one of a few who escaped from the market-hell. I fed him while Mother went around the neighborhood in search for a hiding place for him. She took him to an attic where he spent the next few weeks together with a few other men.

In the afternoon hordes of German soldiers attacked Jewish homes, looting and plundering. The women barricaded themselves inside or fled. Mother and I fortified the back door with a heavy beam from the inside and left through the front entrance which was braced with a double door. The windows of the front room were equipped with safety shutters left over from the time when the room served as a store. We did not want to go to the Bernsteins because their houses had long frontages facing the street, just like ours. We went instead to the neighbor with whom we shared a fire wall. The house was narrow, squeezed between ours and the next neighbor's. The single front window was boarded up because the room also had served as a store. It was almost dark inside. The center of the house, the part between the front room and the kitchen was windowless. Suher Goldstein, the elderly widower, lived alone and was probably glad to see us but we didn't exchange a word. He knew why we came. We spent there a few hours.

I knew where Mother's thoughts were and she knew about mine -- Father.

I felt numb and did not hear anything though we were told later that the Russians had bombed the city. Neither Mother nor Goldstein heard it. Either we were dazed or the house, hugged by two fire walls, was well insulated against noise.

Before nightfall women began peering out of the windows and sticking their noses out of the houses. Mother and I returned home. The house had been ransacked. The back door was broken down and the floor was covered with our belongings. We left everything the way it was and went to look for Father.

Hundreds of women roamed the marketplace. No signs of the men. There were screams and outcries, howls and bawls, hands raised in prayers and fists raised in desperation. Many women, including Mother and me, blamed themselves for not saving the men. Maybe we could have found a better hiding place. Maybe we could have resisted, begged.

When we returned home, we found the mess on the floor larger than before. We did not touch it. We did not undress. We waited for Father hoping he'd walk in any minute. The lock had been broken and we did not bar the door from the inside. Father was supposed to come home.

Early in the morning two soldiers walked in. Seeing the mess on the floor, one of them asked, "Who did it? Ukrainians?"

"No," I answered in a very loud voice. "Soldiers like you."

My mother's face turned white. I did not know why I became daring suddenly. I was just mad. Mad at the world. Mad at myself. Mad at the Almighty for not showing his power. The soldiers were very young. They looked like teen-agers who'd rather play ball than wear arms.

"We only need some towels," one soldier said.

"Help yourself," I answered and showed him the floor.

They rummaged and took what they wanted.

CHAPTER 13

Sunday morning. A dizzy eighteen-year-old boy, Ahzek Birnbaum crawled out of the basement of the tower fortress where a massacre had taken place the day before. He stood across the street from the Roman Catholic church. People dressed in their holiday finery would soon start going to services, and here he was all covered with blood though not his own. He had not taken a direct hit but spent the night among the dying listening to their wails and moans. He remembered being chased into the basement of the tower the previous afternoon. Grenades were thrown in.

We never saw Father alive. Neither did we see him dead. Most bodies were unrecognizable.

The Gentiles who had lined all four sides of the marketplace on that infamous day, did not start talking until a few days later. They needed time to digest the scene.

The Germans had forced all the Jewish men into the basement and threw in a few grenades.

Skalat was not an isolated case. News from neighboring cities were the same. In Grzymalow, 11 kilometers away, a few hundred men, women and children were chased into a large pond and shot. Those who tried to swim to safety were killed first. And those whom the bullet did not reach, drowned. The water stayed red for days to come.

Over 300 bodies waited for burial in the tower of the ancient castle. Ukrainian militia searched daily for Jewish men in attics, cellars, under beds and in closets, in sheds and ruins of old buildings, and daily their searches yielded good results -- for them. There was no place to hide. Every day Jewish men, young and old, dug mass graves, dragged the bodies by horse and buggy from one end of the city to the other, from the tower to the Jewish cemetery. At the end of the day the men were killed and another group was brought in the next morning. This ordeal lasted for three weeks -- until the basement was empty. Four hundred men had died.

Rumors of a Ukrainian delegation asking the entering German army for a pogrom on Jews proved to be true. In 1944 witnesses testified to that fact in front of a Soviet commission. A meeting in which all social classes had been represented, was held in Keveluk's house in June 1941. Delegates were appointed. Bedecked with their blue and yellow ribbons, their national colors, they greeted the Germans with bread and salt, an East European custom of welcoming guests. The Ukrainians hoped to receive their independence as Rosenberg, one of Hitler's adjutants, had promised. By implementing a Jewish pogrom they hoped to help their cause. For Keveluk it was important to play the national leader; he was shielding his son who had collaborated with the Soviets. Young Ivan did not go into hiding during the German occupation but he never appeared in public. Yet he was seen often driving the farm wagon into the field. He was never touched by the authorities probably because of his father's prestige among the Ukrainians.

As a down payment to the pledge of independence, Hitler gave the Ukrainians their own militia who was allowed to do with the Jews whatever they wanted. Sporting rifles over their shoulders, young thugs roamed the streets looking for prey. After all the grave diggers had been shot and buried, the militia seemed to be jobless --until they began escorting women to work. No Jewish men could be found.

The front line soldiers, *Strafabteilung* (Punishment Brigade) left and the regular army, *Wehrmacht*, came in.

They also needed slaves but had to be satisfied with female workers.

While delivering food to Milo in his hiding place, I met a young refugee woman whose husband was burrowed in the same attic as Milo. Sonia was very good looking. Her brown curly hair cascaded to her shoulders, and her green eyes shimmered like ocean waves in the sun. She was also well groomed; she was a bride. Like many other newlyweds with few possessions, they had tried to run away from the Nazis, but got stuck in Skalat. I couldn't say I befriended Sonia. It was not a time for forming friendships. But whenever we met, we had something to say to each other. When we were called to work, we marched together, side by side, under the supervision of armed Ukrainians.

Our group was taken to a neat clean house that used to serve as an orphanage under the Polish regime, and as a school under the communists. The building was spotless but we were told to sweep, wash, scrub and wipe everything from top to bottom. Work had to be invented so Jews could be harassed. We stood in a half circle in the yard while an officer was giving us instructions. The other Germans watched and listened. Suddenly a soldier walked over to the one who was giving us the directions, whispered something into his ear, then pointed a finger at Sonia and me.

"*Komm,*" he said.

We trembled with fear but we followed him.

We entered a spacious kitchen. The door opened to the inside. The soldier placed himself in the niche between the wall and half open door and with his index finger beckoned us to approach him. That scared us even more. But we took a step forward.

"Don't be afraid," he whispered. "I'm not a Nazi. I'm not even a German." He beckoned us to come closer.

We made another step. Now all three of us stood behind the door.

"I'm an Austrian. I don't like what they do" -- with his head and hand he indicated the back yard where the officer was giving orders to the Jewish women. "You don't look like scrubwomen."

I thought I did look like one. My hair was parted in the middle and plaited into two short pigtails that barely reached my shoulders. I wore a plain cotton dress and a pair of worn-out sandals. I had stopped caring about my appearance on the day of the pogrom.

"I'm the cook," said the soldier. "You will stay here with me in the kitchen. I will not give you any hard work. Just make it look as if you do something." He gave us a brush with a long handle, a cleaning cloth and a feather duster. "There's also this next room." He pointed toward the door. "You can do some cleaning there too." He stressed the word "cleaning" with a smile.

The adjoining room was a storage place full of boxes and sacks. Once inside, we could see the whole kitchen through the French door. We watched carefully. If anyone walked in, our cleaning tools began swinging.

At noon the cook called us into the kitchen and served us lunch. We helped with the dishes while two soldiers scrubbed the heavy kettles. In the afternoon more soldiers came visiting and we made believe we were working.

We both were astonished with the cook's kind words. It alleviated the pain and humiliation a bit.

Later we ate a good supper and helped with the dishes again, then we watched as the cook filled two small pots with soup and meat. He added a few slices of bread.

"Take this home for your families, he said. "and bring the dishes back tomorrow. Your group will be working here as long as we're staying here. Probably a few days."

Suddenly a young officer with shining insignia and gleaming riding boots entered the kitchen.

"*Komm,*" he waved at Sonia.

A while later she came back, her face on fire. The cook noticed it as well as I did.

"What happened?" he asked.

She did not answer. He insisted. "Did he say anything bad? or do anything? Tell me the truth. Maybe I can help you."

"He asked," she answered in a barely audible voice, "if I was married and where my husband is."

"Is that all?"

"I told him my husband is in the war," she said. "He wants me to come back here at six o'clock tonight. Of course I will not come, but then I couldn't come to work tomorrow and I'll get myself in trouble with the Ukrainian police. I don't know what to do."

The soldier's plain but frank face lit up with a smile.

"Don't worry. Nothing will happen to you if you don't come tonight. We are not SS. We are *Wehrmacht*, the regular army. Of course there are among us some who are Nazis, and if he's one of them, I can fix him up though he is a lieutenant. He's high above me in rank. But, you see, it's against the German law, they call it the Nurnberger law, for a German person to touch a Jew. He can beat you with a whip or a gun but not with his fist. He probably didn't mean any malice. Women are running after him because he's good looking. He expects you to come on your own free will. That's men, especially military men. Don't be afraid to come tomorrow. I'll watch you."

Sonia did not see the German officer anymore. For two more days we ate German food and listened to a soothing German voice.

"You think we needed your help? We did not ask for it," he told us the next day. "Two Ukrainians came to our commanding officer and offered Jewish laborers. It would have been against the Nazi spirit to refuse."

I have never heard of any other German soldier who behaved or talked as that Austrian in the Wehrmacht did.

Milo was still lingering in the hot crowded attic with a group of men and boys, all dirty, unshaven.

Once, as the night began creeping away, we heard some rustling behind the window. I looked out and my heart jumped. I was sure Jozek came home . I saw a figure of my brother's height with a dark head of hair trying the door. Mother opened it. Two raggedy, weary-looking young Jewish men asked to be let in. They had deserted the Red Army and were trying to reach their families about fifty kilometers to the south. They stirred our souls. They were Jozek's age. Mother and I read each other's thoughts: maybe somewhere a kind person would help her son and my brother in need. We fed the boys, gave them clean clothes and put them up in the room which used to serve as the store and later as my bedroom. This room was joined to the rest of the house by a narrow door in the corner of the wall. At one time

Father had the large double door from the center removed and a small door installed on the side. This arrangement provided more shelf space for the store. Now we covered the door with a large decorative hanging. A trained eye would have noticed that the woven fabric on the wall was out of place but we knew that the young militiamen's eyes were not cultivated in the field of house decoration. The trick worked so well that we began thinking of bringing Milo home from the crammed attic and placing him in that room together with the two boys.

Ukrainians came daily, asked for men, plundered, and left. On one occasion I even asked if they had ever found a man in a drawer. They did not answer. Most of the militia were either dim-witted or vicious or both. I was lucky. These were stupid.

For more than a week we fooled them. But the moment we feared most, came. Two Ukrainians asked the usual question and received the usual answer. "No men here." They checked under the beds, under the sofa, opened closets and drawers and were ready to leave when one of them turned back.

"Funny," he said. "This house looks much bigger from the outside." He stood in the open back door. "Look here," he pulled his partner over toward himself. "See that window. There must be another one around the corner." He checked. "Of course. There's another room," he said. He let out a yell of victory, ran back into the house, pulled the rug off the door and tore it open.

"Here!" he exclaimed. "I told you Jews are shrewd."

I could not look at the two boys. The scene reminded me too much of the Sabbath morning when Father and Milo left the house. I would have liked to spit into the faces of the two hoodlums but each had a gun dangling from his shoulder.

CHAPTER 14

After all the victims of the massacre had been buried, the men began crawling out of their hiding places. Milo came home. The Ukrainian city management was spreading the news they supposedly had received from the Germans that there won't be anymore killings but Jews would have to work. Mikolay Bilyk, a political and social nobody, had been given full control of the Jewish work force who had to appear every morning in the marketplace, Bilyk's place of conquest. He ruled with the help of the militia, assigning daily work. A scrawny little man without a cultural or moral position in the community, he would send educated and prominent Jews to perform the dirtiest and hardest jobs like cleaning latrines, breaking stones into gravel with small hammers or scrubbing floors in buildings that had not been cleaned for years.

I faced Bilyk many times since I worked not only for myself but also in place of Mother and Milo. The massacre had taught us to shelter the men and the elderly.

To deepen the humiliation Bilyk would tip his hat at the Jews he knew in person as he used to do in old times, then wink his mousy eyes and announce in his slithery voice, "This way to farm wagons," or "That way to the cleaning brigade." He would also add the title if the Jew had one. Poland was a great country for educational and social titles. A physician was *pan* (Mr.) doktor and this wife *pani* doktorowa, a lawyer was *pan* mecenas (for the Roman patron of arts) and his wife *pani* mecenasowa, and a high school teacher was called professor. Class distinction characterized every phase of life in the city regardless of religion. The titled middle class as well as the untitled rich set the trends for social events and decided which charities received the profits. They were a small but well-functioning group who cared for the welfare of the community. They didn't mind poking fun at themselves. One year the invitations to the great Purim ball carried in place of signatures nameless titles: *Pan* Doktor as always, *Pani* Doktorowa as usual.

Bilyk must have derived supreme satisfaction from using the correct terms in addressing the troubled Jewish intelligentsia. To his dismay he was demoted when the Gestapo established their offices in Tarnopol. The SS became the owners of the Jews. They could use us anyway they wanted, dead or alive. (As it was learned after the war, some bodies were used for lamp shades, soap, wigs). They rented out Jews to different companies and received payment for their labor -- six *groszy* a day per slave. At the same time the Ukrainians were ordered to oversee the forming of a Jewish council (*Judenrat*). It was supposed to be a declaration of Jewish independence. Few fools believed in the promised Jewish autonomy but fewer yet imagined that the council would be forced to become the instrument of implementation for the most hideous Nazi strategies. It was not easy to put together a group who would have to take responsibility for the fate of the Jews. And when the group was finally established it was harder yet to find a leader. Nobody wanted the honor. The Gestapo was becoming impatient and the situation was turning dangerous. After a long search and many sessions a young energetic bookkeeper, Mayer Nirler, accepted the undesirable position of chairman.

The initial assignment of the Judenrat was to collect and pay to the German treasury the amount of 600,000 rubles in gold for the crime of being Jews. We named it the gold contingent. It was supposed to be compensation for all the ills Jews had inflicted on Germany. This penalty was imposed on every Jewish community. My family did not have any gold. We doled out the last of our cash and were left penniless until we were able to sell some of our belongings.

The gold contingent was meant for the Fuehrer, for Hitler, but there were many small Hitlers who considered themselves entitled to a princely life style at the expenses of the Jews. The twelve men of the *Schutz-polizei*,(safety police) called *Schupo*, lived in the nicest Jewish house which the Council had equipped with the best furniture, carpets, pictures and all the conveniences available in a small city. The choicest foods and drinks had to be delivered daily. Then came demands of clothing, jewelry, leather goods, music instruments and all kinds of luxury items to be shipped to the Vaterland. Besides material wealth the Council had to supply the Germans with slave laborers.

Every Jew over the age of six had to wear a white armband with the Star of David embroidered in blue. Every Jew over the age of fourteen was a member of the work force. The Council had to deliver daily a few hundred people, men and women, to work. Jews who worked in the fields were not permitted to carry off a potato or eat a cucumber they had picked.

The Council had their own militia but their armbands were yellow. They had a German name, *Ordnungsdienst* (Order Guard) and were headed by Dr. Jozef Brief, a veterinarian who was not allowed to practice. A lawyer, Lempert (also not practicing) was responsible for the delivery of workers. He did not hesitate to use his militia to enforce his power. He could not afford to falter. His life, the lives of his family, the lives of the Judenrat members and maybe the existence of the community depended on obeying the German orders.

If we had thought that work under Ukrainians was hard and demeaning, we learned what suffering was under the SS.

Every day 150 men worked at the quarry about three kilometers to the north of the city. They were supervised by civilian employees of the German Otto Heil Company without the presence of German soldiers. It was therefore considered the best job. Work on railroad tracks was considered more dangerous. It was under military command. And that kind of work never stopped. The Soviets had converted the narrow Polish railroad tracks into wide ones to fit their own trains, and now the Germans were changing them back to the original narrow width. The labor forces, Jews, and sometimes Russian prisoners of war, worked under tremendous pressure because the eastern front needed supplies badly. In November Jews went to Borki Wielkie by train every morning and came back the same day in the evening.

I worked in Borki a few times not only when I was called but also when Milo was called. Milo went only on the days when the Germans did not accept female substitutes. Women were treated better than men in Borki. They were not beaten and sometimes even given easier jobs.

Jews and Russians did not work together. I saw the prisoners of war only late in the afternoon when they were returning to their camp. Many of them wore their summer clothes, many walked barefoot, many were sick and had to be carried by their friends. We had heard from villagers that every prisoner who stayed in the camp during the work hours, was shot. In comparison with the Russians, we were well off. When the prisoners passed the embankment where we were laying the tracks, some Jew would throw down a piece of bread to them. This caused fights among the hungry Russians, and the Jew, if caught red-handed, was treated with a whip over his back. The aim of the Nazis was to starve the prisoners. On December 24, 1941, the emaciated men were shot and the Jews who had been coming daily by train, were detained and placed in the camp evacuated by the Russians. Only the Jewish women were sent back to the city. We were lucky again. Milo was not in Borki on that day. At that time Jewish luck was derived form negative sources; one was lucky not for what happened to him but for what did not happen. If one was not caught by Jewish or Ukrainian militia for work in a labor camp, if one did not meet a soldier who beat him up in the street, one was lucky.

The first time I went to Borki, it was drizzling. I wore Father's pants, high boots and carried a shovel on my shoulder. I dug the wet clay. Walking was a disaster. Whenever I put my foot into the ground, I was afraid I might not be able to pull it out. The same went for my shovel. But I dug and so did the other girls. In distress people acquire supernatural powers. We dug and scooped and filled wheelbarrows with the muddy substance for the men to push away. When a cart became stuck on the wet clay, the spinning, whistling wheel splashed the yellow goo around and covered us from head to toe.

I had expected to meet a friend or an acquaintance but I could not recognize anyone. Dressed in unusual clothes (normally girls did not wear pants in Poland) and enveloped in the yellow paste, we're strangers to each other. When I slipped and plummeted into the slush, I took a good look at my rescuer. It was Lora, one of my closest friends. We had been working side by side the whole day.

Labor camps for Jews sprang up all around in neighboring villages with the worst one in Kamionki where *Obersturmfuehrer* Rebel's kingdom was located. For the Jews it was the same work as in Borki, laying railroad tracks but for the Germans it was a place to use up Jewish lives as fast as possible. Tortured and beaten, men were plagued by hunger and typhoid fever. The Council tried to exchange the inmates often so as not to wear them out too much but the Germans mowed them down before replacements arrived. It was not easy to find substitutes. Nirler and other members of the Council became hardened toward the Jewish population. Men tried to hide although it was not always possible. The Jewish militia grabbed men, boys, and often elderly off the streets and hiding places. Milo went into the neighbor's attic again. The difference was -- summertime it was hot there and now it was cold. Our own attic was too open to provide a safe hideout.

The Germans had one weakness that worked toward the Jews' advantage; they were susceptible to bribes but only at very high stakes. It meant if a Jew fell into the Kamionki pit, he could be brought back -- only sometimes -- if the Council came up with a high ransom and another victim. It turned into a vicious circle. The demands of the SS for laborers and material goods grew constantly, and so did the number of men dying in Kamionki and other camps. The Council had to support financially not only the local Schupo and the SS in all the camps but also the Gestapo in Tarnopol, the place that implemented all Hitler's decrees against the Jews fo our region. Every German office wanted to have a voice in our fate, and every German who amounted to something or pretended to amount, held his pockets open. After they filled them with Jewish money, they proceeded to fulfill Hitler's wish -- annihilate Jews.

CHAPTER 15

My father must have been a prophet by allowing his children to learn a trade. During the war it was a great help. Especially Milo's vocation was in demand under the Soviets as under the Germans. Zimmer, the Council member in charge of provisions (pro forma for Jews, de facto for Nazis), appointed Milo the leather cutter for the Germans who kept ordering fancy footwear, riding boots and ladies' shoes. This way Milo avoided being sent to a labor camp and earned some money on the side from private customers. The best part was that he did not have to deal directly with the

Germans. Zimmer brought the orders and the measurements. The problem was that Milo did not receive the paper as a 'useful' Jew as did those who worked in the offices of the Council. We did not know at the time, but later these papers proved to be worthless. Zimmer suspected that.

"Not to worry," he would say. "If a German catches a Jew with such a paper, he doesn't respect it anyway. If our militia catches you, I'll get you out. The best is to stay home."

Milo listened. He hardly ever left the house. I also stayed home because I became his helper. The safest thing for a Jew was to stay indoors. Mother ventured out only when it was important. She had to hunt for food and for political news which was often rumors. The danger of mingling was great because of the typhoid fever epidemic. The pest hardly missed a house. We brought out from hiding the boys' sewing machine and Milo re-opened his workshop. I learned to cut and sew leather linings, and we often labored the whole night if a deadline had to be met. We remembered every minute that Milo's life depended on our work. The Council was constantly searching for men to send to the labor camps and to the quarry.

An insane hunt for scarce local jobs began. A German company hired bottle washers and rag sorters, the city offered a few cleaning jobs, and some influential Ukrainians were able to enjoy free Jewish labor. An employer needed a permit from the SS to hire a Jew to work without pay and these permits were not easily obtainable. The Germans preferred to work the Jews to exhaustion in the camps. The employees of the Council were thought (in the beginning) to be untouchables, but the Judenrat hired mostly relatives and friends. Envy, jealousy, bitterness turned relative against relative, friend against friend, neighbor against neighbor.

Under the Soviets, when warm footwear was rare, a new form of winter boots had become popular. They were called eskimos. The upper part that reached the knee, was made of heavy blanket and was held up across the calf with leather straps and buckles. During the cold winter of 1941-2 people were glad if they had an extra blanket. If they didn't, they used old coats, shawls or anything that was heavier than a bed sheet. Besides working for the Germans through the middleman Zimmer, Milo and I spent a lot of time making eskimos, mostly for Gentiles who often paid with food products. Even with the use of old fabric, the eskimos were quite expensive. After paying Milo, the customer had to take them to a shoemaker to put on leather (which was high-priced) soles and heels. Under the Soviets only women wore eskimos, but under the German occupation anyone who could afford them, put them on.

Our invaluable reporter in those days was Shmeel Marder, a young man who since childhood was considered a bit off the regular beat. He came from a poor but open to other poor people, home. His parents fed the hungry supplying some of them with full board from time to time though they had five children of their own. Shmeel was the youngest and the only troublemaker among his bright, hard working siblings. Everyone of them possessed artistic abilities and used them. Two self-educated brothers had left before the war for Palestine where they excelled in sculpture and painting. The girls never cared for food for the mind but achieved efficiency by trial and error and became top seamstresses. Without courses, patterns, teaching books or dummy models, they produced splendid creations for the rich women and those who craved to pass as rich. We knew Marders well because both our families were in the same branch of business -- leather.

Shmeel had a good but unpredictable heart. He helped whom he wanted to help and nobody was able to figure out why he liked some and disliked others or why he would suddenly drop his favored people and move himself over to a different group or individual. As unpredictable as he was, he always made himself useful when he was around. As a child he was often mean but he outgrew that phase. When he was about ten-years old, he came to his father's store during a busy market day and asked for spending money. Not receiving an answer, he blocked the door with his body and outstretched arms, yelling at the top of his lungs, "People, customers, don't shop here. The leather is made from paper. Don't buy it. They're selling paper here!"

When I was eighteen years old, three days after I had arrived home for my summer vacation, I fell ill. The inexperienced doctors in our small city declared me in danger of dying from a burst appendix. My exhausted Mother and Jozek who was only thirteen, watched over me day and night. Father, busy with the store, could not stay up nights, and Milo was only eight. When news about my illness spread, many people volunteered their services so Mother and Jozek could rest. The doctors insisted there should always be two people with me in the room in case of an emergency. Shmeel was the most faithful volunteer. Others changed off every few hours; he stayed the whole night. With the slightest change in my face or in my movements, he ran for the doctor without conferring with my parents.

One dark night (street lights were out after twelve o'clock) he woke up old doctor Gutman.

"Come, quick, there's something wrong with her."

While pulling on his pants, the doctor asked for details.

"I don't know. She does not look good to me."

The overweight physician was out of breath when he arrived at our house after the long walk. There was no change in my condition.

A few nights later Shmeel tried his method again but he could not fool Dr. Gutman twice. Mother had warned him about Shmeel's great faithfulness and lack of judgment. The fact was that Shmeel did not try to fool anybody. It was neither a trick nor a prank. He was convinced that I was in bad shape and in need of medical help.

"She did not look good to me," was his only excuse.

At the beginning of 1942 Shmeel began visiting us again. He had appointed himself kind of busboy for the Council and they tolerated him because he made himself useful as an unofficial detective. He was bright and had a natural intelligence but misused his assets too often. He knew every Jew in town, those who were hiding their riches that could satisfy the German demands and sometimes save a Jewish life, and those who were hiding their poverty because of pride while suffering form hunger and cold. He also knew every corner of the building the Council was located in. It used to be the Hebrew school which he was supposed to attend but since he did not like to study in the classroom, he roamed around exploring the nooks and niches in order to hide from the teachers. Now he was able to listen to secret meetings of the Council while staying invisible. With his unique loyalty to certain people he warned some, including us, about approaching danger like when the Council planned a massive manhunt for new camp inmates, or when the militia would go door to door searching for a special kind of furniture or rugs for the Germans. Shmeel was not much of a talker. He would say what he wanted and fall silent. If we suspected he knew more, we had to prod him to pull words out of his mouth, one by one. Very often this method worked.

For some time all kinds of work papers had been sweeping the community. Rumors circulated that only the pink slips were good, a few days later only the yellow ones could keep a man out of the camps, later only the green ones were supposed to be valid. Once the crazy hunt for different work papers began, nobody could stop it. The Germans, knowing the papers were meaningless, signed them at will -- for a fat payment. The downtrodden, the miserable ones wanted to believe. They knew they were fooling themselves but the self-deception gave them a momentary feeling of respite. Neither I nor Milo had any of those pseudo-credentials. We saw the scheme, and Shmeel confirmed it. Somebody had turned it into a short-lived business enterprise by paying a Schupo man and selling the papers for a nice profit. Mother who took care of all our inner and outer affairs, insisted that a good hiding place in the house was a necessity.

She decided to change the entrance to the basement. We tore two boards off the kitchen floor and left them laying loose in place. On top of those boards we planted the sofa. In the basement, underneath the new entrance, we deposited a sturdy chair. Now the trapdoor in the back hall, the real entrance, had to be masked. Mother covered it with an old rug but that was not enough. Anyone could uncover our secret by lifting the rug. We wracked our brains for a few days and again Mother was the one to come up with a solution. Since the trapdoor was level with the floor, we'd stack all our firewood on top. Nobody would be suspicious and nobody would be willing to remove the piles of wood to check what's under them. Wintertime we used to throw down the wood from the attic whenever we needed, but this was already spring and we fired the stove only for cooking. If anyone would hear or see us throwing all our firewood down, it would become suspicious. We, as the rest of the Jews, turned egotists. A hiding place, usually very small, had to be arranged in great secrecy otherwise the whole neighborhood would want to come and nobody would be saved. Rumors of mass-killings floated already in the air but the Council tried to mitigate them as false reports.

Our final conclusion was that the chopped wood had to be carried not thrown down.

Milo and I were busy with work for Zimmer.

"I hope we'll finish it in two days," sail Milo. "Then we'll bring down the wood."

When I came into the back hall in the evening, I saw almost all the wood we owned stacked neatly on the rug. I couldn't imagine how many times Mother had to climb those narrow ladder-rungs and carry down load after load.

Suddenly I realized how selfish we children have become in the atmosphere of panic. Knowing our mother, we should have taken under consideration the possibility she would not wait for our help. She was energetic, enterprising and considerate. She was afraid if we waited two more days, it might be too late. She also felt sorry for us because of our constant work in the shop.

I recalled how she had pampered me ten years earlier during my illness. She hardly left the room until I left the bed.

Yes, offspring have a short memory.

CHAPTER 16

Rumors like ghosts wafted in the air. And every day they were more frightening than the day before. It was our daily bread. In May 1942 the SS carried out a "resettlement action" in Tarnopol, a city much bigger than ours and the seat of the Gestapo office. The Germans insisted the Jews were being sent to better places where life would be easier for them. Nobody believed and the panic grew.

Shmeel arrived with a warning that the Germans want thirty girls for a camp. I did not think I'd be one of the first ones on the list but just in case I spent the rest of the day and the whole next day in the cellar. The thirty young women were sent to Jagielnica to work in a tobacco factory. After six weeks the families of the girls together with the Council arranged to bring the inmates home with the help of enormous bribes. Barely in time. A few days later the four hundred remaining workers, all female and Jewish, were exterminated. The factory did not have anymore work for them.

Shmeel, true to his character, suddenly stopped bringing us news. Mother began circulating among crowds. Sniffing for information was a necessity. Life in constant fear taught us to keep our eyes and ears open.

On a Sunday afternoon Mother walked into the house with a rare smile on her face.

"Guess what? I was in the *Judenrat* and I talked to Lempert," she said.

I looked at her in surprise.

"What?" Milo stood for a moment with his mouth open. "I thought we decided not show our faces there. Let them forget we exist."

"Never mind. They don't forget anybody. They have lists. I had a good reason and I'm glad I went. I saw a group of quarry workers milling around the *Judenrat* and I had to find out what was going on. The men complained not about their work but about their shoes. They walk so far to and from the quarry and on stony terrain and some of them are almost barefoot. They know the Council does not have new shoes to give them but what they want is at least to have the old ones repaired."

"And what answer did they get?" I asked.

"I didn't wait to find out. I marched right into the office and got a hold of Munio Lempert. After all, he's the head of the labor department. I told him I'd give him our front room for a cobblers' shop and he should appoint Milo the head of the shop. And he agreed."

It was considered a fortunate brake, a safeguard against a labor camp.

I vacated my room. The shoemakers installed the counter and the shelves and the room looked like a store again. Most of these men were almost illiterate and for that reason they had to accept the leadership of a young boy. Like Milo, they were glad they were not forced to go to a camp or to the quarry.

The cobblers' shop was always busy. Not only quarry workers but all poor Jews were served for free. Zimmmer brought wooden bottoms for shoes from Tarnopol, a sole and heel in one piece, never seen in Poland before. Most of the shoes of the quarry brigade were beyond repair yet the Council had to send men to work. Zimmer who traveled to Tarnopol often, finally got a hold of a batch of shoe uppers made from hard coarse leather. The shoemakers attached them to the wooden soles with nails. Thus the quarry battalion was equipped with new footwear. The new shoes were not comfortable but kept the feet dry.

Milo was still able to work for Zimmer because the shop did not require his constant presence. He was not a cobbler and the shop did not have any soft leather for him to cut. His job was only clerking and he was called in whenever he was needed.

Hunger, cold and typhus kept the Jews in their clutches of the winter of 1941-2. For the very poor, the Council opened a soup kitchen.

In spring of 1942 one of the worst floods anyone could remember, hit the eastern Karpaty mountains. The mountaineers lost everything, including their homes. Since our part of Poland was known as the bread-basket of the country, the victims of the flood came pouring down asking for food. Those were Gentiles, and they went from door to door, begging. The Karpatian Jews had to stay and starve because they were not allowed to travel. The Jews of Skalat shared whatever they had with the mountaineers though there were plenty hungry Jews in the city. Nobody left our house empty-handed.

Although misery was widespread and there was no hope for the future, young people longed for a bit of normal life. Teen-agers would gather once in a while in a private home for a simple form of entertainment like playing cards or just youthful talk. With longer days and more sunshine, girls were reaching again for their face powder, puffs and lipstick and began looking into the mirrors. Ambitious women did housecleaning as they used to do every spring before Passover but this time it was more for fear of typhus than to please God.

The synagogues were closed and it was forbidden to bake matzos.

Here and there a red geranium would enliven a bleak house or a blooming oleander would be seen on a porch. Warmer weather kindled sparks of hope in some hearts; maybe a miracle would happen and somebody or something would reverse the Jewish fate.

CHAPTER 17

Early Sunday morning, August 30, 1942, blinding sunlight promised a hot sweltering day. We heard a knock at the window. Mother waved me and Milo away when she noticed a militiaman peeking in through the glass pane. She opened the window. The man was out of breath; he seemed to have been running hard. He carried a bundle in his hand.

"I have to see Milo," he said.

Mother, feeling uneasy, asked, "What for?"

"Don't ask questions," he answered in an irritable voice "I'm in a hurry. I have work for him and it must be done right away."

Hearing this, Milo leaned out the window. The young man unfolded the package, explained in a few short words what had to be done, added in a decisive tone, "Noon at the latest," and left. He did not walk away, he ran. We were puzzled. Milo and I got to work. Nobody fooled with the militia. We had in front of us a few dozen pieces of stiff yellow paper in the size of armbands with the word *Ordnungsdienst* and the Star of David on it. The package contained also a matching number of transparent pieces of plastic, narrow strips of soft leather, straps of heavier leather, and buckles. Each armband had to be covered with the plastic and enclosed with piping made from the thinner leather. The heavier leather was used for straps. We rushed like factory workers on an assembly line. Milo used the sewing machine. I measured and cut the leather and the paper. Mother punched holes in the straps and attached the buckles.

We were suspicious. A few days earlier Shmeel had dropped in after a long absence.

"I don't like what's going on out there," he said. "They whisper and whisper and no regular meetings like they used to have."

It sounded just as he had said to the doctor ten years earlier. "I don't know what's wrong but I don't like the way she looks." There was no doubt that he enjoyed his exaggerations. But I was afraid that this time he was right. What's the sudden need for fancy armbands for the militia?

The sun was climbing. A gritty mixture of heat and dust hung in the air. The sewing machine vibrated, roared and whirred. Perspiration dripped from behind Milo's ears into the well of his collarbone and spilled from his forehead onto his hands. Once in a while he'd wipe the sweat off his upper lip. About every half hour a militiaman would show up at the window, pick up what was ready, drop the words, "Hurry up," and run. Mother asked a few times. "What's this all about?" but she never received an answer.

We lived about one block from the main synagogue which had been closed, just as had all other synagogues, since the beginning of the German occupation. But on that hot Sunday we noticed some movements around the beautiful building, one of the city's attractions. It had been rebuilt after the great fire of the Jewish quarter at the turn of the century by a famous architect, Tarnowsky, and the hand-painted murals were executed by an equally famous painter, Sak, who did some additional touch-ups at his old age in the '30's.

Ukrainian police were very visible. With rifles over their shoulders, they paraded up and down as if watching the front entrance. Soon Jewish militia showed up wearing the new armbands. There was no doubt in our minds; there would be victims today. But who? Would 'they' take everybody? anybody? Would there be a selection? Again. A bang on the windowsill, a whack on the glass pane. "Faster, faster," and the man, sometimes just a boy, was gone. No other words were said.

The church clock visible from our kitchen window showed a few minutes past eleven when we finished the job. Our own clocks had disappeared during the robberies. Milo, his face on fire, stretched himself on the sofa before he washed and ate. Mother and I kept watch at the partially open window. The synagogue was too far from us to hear voices but close enough for visual observation. We could not see the door because of the wrong angle but the sidewalk in front of the building was in clear view.

Militia, both Jewish and Ukrainian, were bringing older people, men and women, into the synagogue. It was not a hunt for workers. It was a search for the elderly. Mother was fifty-three, probably old enough in the eyes of the Nazis. I made her a sandwich, prepared a bottle of water and Milo lifted the loose boards off the floor. Mother sat down at the edge of the opening with her legs dangling. We held her arms until her feet touched the chair below, and she went down. I gave her the bread, the water, a candle and matches. We replaced the boards and dragged the sofa from the next room to cover the floor. I put bedding on the sofa so it should look like a bed. I hoped no one would check under it.

Our great-uncle, Itzak, was at least seventy years-old but in perfect health. He enjoyed a good joke, a hearty meal, and his conservative way of life. If he had known that his sons had bought (before the war) a pair of skis for their fifteen year-old sister, he might have disowned them. His opinion about cross-country skiers -- there were no mountains and hardly any hills around Skalat -- was very simple. "What stupid creatures! Isn't it easier to walk than drag that weight?" Cyla stored her skis in our house which gave me the opportunity to use them sometimes. Aunt Debora had raised eight children but with her blond, without a hint of grey, hair, she still looked like a cream puff. I ran over with my warning and told them what I saw. Racing back home I noticed there were no people in the streets besides militia. An old poorly dressed woman who could hardly walk tried to break away from a young boy wearing a yellow armband. He held a grip on her arm. I slowed down my step and heard him say, "Don't worry, grandma, you'll be fine."

Everything became clear. The new, presumably impressive armbands had to establish the show of power during the so called "resettlement action". Since no one stopped me, I understood that only "useless" people, those who did not work, would be taken away. My aunt and uncle did not work but neither did my mother. I felt my blood curling in my veins and began running faster. To be home. To make sure she was safe in the basement.

I had great confidence in my uncle's hideout but it was too late to transfer Mother. Under his well-built house uncle had a labyrinth of a basement with complicated passageways and partitions where a great number of people had taken refuge from heavy artillery shells during World War I.

We had never fixed the lock on our door. Now Milo and I underpinned it with a heavy beam and sat down to watch the commotion around the synagogue. We saw not only militia but also young men and women with white armbands and members of the Council. There was a great deal of arm waving among the different smaller and larger groups. It seemed also as if there was a lot of squabbling going on. In front of our house two militiamen were dragging a trembling, staggering woman. Her long full skirt dating from the turn of the century, swept the sidewalk. On her head she wore a babushka that covered part of her dried-up face. Because of the heat we kept the window partially open and could hear the voice of one of the militiamen.

"You'll be better off than here. You won't be hungry."

My mind was in a whirl. If a person could only stop thinking! A blank brain would permit me to enjoy a state of indifference. But how could one achieve such a luxury? I sat down in a corner of the room and closed my eyes. I would rest. I would sleep. I would cry. But none of those things happened. The tears had dried up long ago, after Father's disappearance. I listened to the pounding of my heart and hammering of my temples.

Mother came up in the evening and we asked each other whether we should go to bed as we did any other night or to the cellar, and the decision fell on the cellar. The searches outside did not seem to be concluded. None of us slept. There was no room in my head for anything else but fear and debasement. To hide like rats in a hole while other human beings no better and no worse than we, walked the streets, cooked, ate their meals at tables, played with their children and entertained friends, was incomprehensible. If one of my forefathers had accepted Jesus I would be sleeping in a bed now instead of sitting on a stool in the basement. I was one of the 'chosen' people. Chosen for what? For suffering? I did not volunteer to be a martyr. I wanted to be an average, normal human being.

A few times during the night we raised the board slightly, waiting for daylight. I was the first to emerge from darkness into the dusky world. The crowd in front of the house of prayer had grown larger and livelier than the day before. After the early rays of the sun lit up the big building, I could perceive figures with white armbands darting from person to person and from group to group as if carrying on a heated dispute.

I made coffee from roasted ground barley and cut a few slices of bread. After breakfast Mother slid back to the basement. I begged her to take along a book and read at candlelight but she refused. Candles were a rare commodity and she didn't want to waste any.

What we saw through the window puzzled us more and more. Not only old people were dragged to the synagogue. Some were middle-aged, some young, and some mere children. And not all were poor. Among the elderly we recognized some well-to-do people. We did not know what to think about the situation. Were we in danger? I wanted Milo to go down to the basement and he told me to go down. I could not accept his opinion because until now "they" (whoever they were, SS or *Judenrat*) looked only for young men. I considered myself safer then he. We both stayed, watched and waited for farther developments. Time stood still. On and off I glanced at the church steeple to check the clock.

By noon the crowds in front of the synagogue seemed to be overtaken by turmoil and confusion. People were running like crazy from group to group. If there had been merchandise, one would have thought it was a market day.

At four o'clock in the afternoon trucks pulled up in front of the building. I could see only two and part of the third because the rest were hidden behind houses. Soldiers jumped out and headed toward the door which was not visible from our viewpoint.

The hunters came to claim the prey.

Milo and I joined Mother in the cellar.

The second sleepless night dragged on and on. We huddled against each other and against the damp wall waiting we didn't know for what. A few times during the night we raised the floorboard. Nothing. Dark and quiet. After what seemed a year or a lifetime, Milo and I crawled out. Mother was supposed to wait until we called her but she followed us a minute later. Day had just broken.

I looked out the window. No sign of life. The grey little houses, many of them joined wall-to-wall, hugged each other in the semi-darkness just as they did yesterday and yesteryear and many years before that day. They or their prototypes had been facing the synagogue for about two centuries with hardly any change. Maybe a chimney collapsed or a windowpane cracked but life went on. Babies were born and later died as men and women often in the same houses, in the same beds.

I was sure no Jew had slept that night. They watched and waited as we did. Soon twilight became suffused with sunrise. Here and there a face would show up in a window or a head would poke out from a partially opened door.

Everybody waited for somebody else to step outside first. When one person finally emerged, a flood of people poured out of the houses. We joined the crowd. By listening and asking questions we were able to piece together the events of the last few days.

The atmosphere in the Council's office had been saturated with wild rumors, hearsay and horror stories but few outsiders knew the truth.

The *Gestapo* had demanded four hundred people for a "resettlement action." One had already been held earlier in Tarnopol and no one knew what happened to the "resettlers." They were never heard from. It was hard to believe that innocent people were taken away by train for the purpose of being killed. Meetings were held day and night and arguments crossed back and forth.

"It happened here last summer. Outright killings."

"But those were front line soldiers. Wild ones. Punishment battalions. Hungry for blood. They were on the way to war and practiced on Jews."

"The *Gestapo* promised it won't happen again."

"Last summer they did it on the spot. Now they want to do it somewhere else."

"Last summer it was not organized. Now it might be organized murder."

The agonizing problem gnawed on the Council members' conscience. The community got a sniff of the bad news and whispered.

"Something bad is cooking. The councilmen know but won't talk," the suspicious people would say.

Yes. They knew but had to keep quiet. They did not believe in the resettlement plan and feared the German demands would grow in time. Nirler, the chairman, suggested the old, sick, troublemakers and those on public assistance be handed over to the Germans in order to save the rest of the community.

"Even if we give them the four hundred, they will come for more," was one opinion.

Those last words proved true that fatal Monday.

"But how can Jews send other Jews to death?" the councilmen asked each other.

They could and they did in desperate hope that this would be the first and the last "resettlement action." The prognosis was that the Germans would let the so-called "useful Jews" live as long as they were able to work.

Sunday morning the militia received their final instructions from the Council. The sparkling new yellow armbands were supposed to draw fear and respect. Every member of the militia was responsible for a certain number of victims in accordance with a prepared list. If one was not able to make the quota, he had to bring his own parents, uncles, aunts, friends or be prepared to become himself the casualty.

In Warsaw, the capitol of Poland, the chairman of the Jewish Council, Czerniakow, took his own life instead of fulfilling the orders of the Nazis. Nothing like that happened in Skalat. The difference was that in our city the SS asked for four hundred and in Warsaw the number ran in the tens of thousands.

We learned that uncle Itzak and aunt Debora as well as their son-in-law, went with the transport. We rushed to see cousin Klara. Her rich parents were gone but her husband was home. He described to us what he called "a miracle" of his escape.

By Monday morning the expectations of collecting four hundred people looked dim. Some potential victims had found good hiding places. Some, brought in by one militiaman through the front door, were let out by another man through the back door. The Council decided to make a wider sweep. By temporarily arresting the elderly rich they hoped to collect a large amount of money as a bribe in hope of substituting money for lives. A list of wealthy elderly was composed.

I had too much trust in my uncle's basement. The couple were found and brought to the gathering place, the synagogue. The Council asked for huge amounts of money under threat of deportation. Bickering -- scenes we had observed but could not understand -- and arguing about the size of the bail was going on in front of the house of prayer between members of the Council and relatives of the inmates. Many got out in time but not our uncle and aunt. Their two sons and the son-in-law were in the middle of a heated discussion with one of the *Judenrat* members when the trucks arrived. Klara's brothers managed to flee but a soldier grabbed her husband Motie Rosenblatt and threw him into the truck.

Motie was a bright man, efficient in everything he did and very agile. He was skinny and of medium height.

"When we got off the truck in Tarnopol," he told us later, "I kept moving one step forward and two backward. Whichever way I looked I saw chaos. There was SS and there was Ukrainian police but they could not keep order. And there were many gapers, Gentiles, of course. When the pressure from the back became too strong, I started moving to the side. I noticed a dark corner under the bridge. I made myself shorter and shorter. I kept shrinking. I slithered between legs and wagon wheels until I reached the dark isolated place. The Tarnopol Jews were already in the cattle wagons. Now the SS were loading those who were brought from Skalat and many other places. Those who didn't want to get in, were whipped. I saw many dead bodies. And don't forget that I saw only a small part of the railroad yard. The train was very long but I don't know how long because I didn't see the front of it or the back."

After darkness he left his hiding place under the bridge and made the 32 kilometers home during the night.

Not a word was ever heard from the deportees. Months later rumors stemming from confessions of the crew of the train, began circulating that the victims had been dropped off at a place named Belzets.

Motie also enlightened us on the turmoil around the synagogue on Sunday afternoon and Monday. Quite a number of people were bailed out from the internment by their families. But his in-laws had been arrested late in the afternoon just before the arrival of the Germans. There was hardly any time to discuss a monetary transaction. During the night a militiaman, Sheeyko the *Ganev* (Thief), infuriated by the Council's policy of bailing out the rich, freed a group of the poorest inmates and that prompted the *Judenrat* to bring in more people.

The lucky ones who escaped deportation -- for the time being -- later described scenes from inside the building. Many people stayed there from Sunday noon until the trucks arrived. The heat was unbearable. No water. No toilet facilities. Some swayed in prayers, some sat in a stupefied resignation, some fainted, and some died. Later their bodies were loaded into the trucks together with the living. Probably it did not matter in Belzets whether one died earlier or later. In the end the body count was the same.

Milo and I had done the right thing by jumping into the cellar as soon as the trucks arrived. When the SS had arrived, they took one glance at the crowd prepared for them in the synagogue, yelled "There's no 400. Let's go," and ran off to break doors in the neighborhood. About a hundred more, young and old, women and children were added to the transport without counting.

CHAPTER 19

The sun baked the tin roof of our house as if it were desert sand but the cobblers did not complain. They also were the lucky ones. All of them returned to work on Tuesday to hammer away on the shoes. Men were still hauled to labor camps, and the whispers, "Something is brewing again," drifted from mouth to mouth.. Nobody talked about papers anymore. It was bunkers, bunkers, bunkers. Papers, yes, they were sought, but no work papers. Fake Aryan documents took over the arena. A few Jews began a new business -- fabricating and selling what was in great demand.

In the meantime our inventive mother came up with a brilliant idea of digging a bunker under the house. Our basement could not serve as a safe hideaway. It was too common. Every house had a cellar and every cellar could be changed into a bunker by tearing boards off the floor. Mother laid out a plan to dig a tunnel under the outhouse and build a seat for three at the end of the shaft. Our outhouse was different from all others. It was not a wooden structure in the backyard. It was part of the house with the entrance from the outside. Two of its walls adjoined the kitchen and the third Goldstein's house. Only a small door faced the outside world. Under the wooden seat stood a metal container that was cleaned periodically by an individual who earned more money from his smelly job than others at their nice clean employment places.

Milo removed the seat and I tried to drill a hole in the dry ground with a heavy pick. In a day's work I made a dent the size of a thimble. Mother didn't do any better. Milo could not leave the shop because it would have drawn the attention of the shoemakers. And secrecy was of prime importance. We were selfish, because everybody else was. Everybody talked about bunkers, everybody wanted to build one and many did, and everybody wanted to hide with the mice and the rats. Those who didn't have their own dugouts wanted to find out where somebody else's concealed places were located. These especially built places were usually small and had they become public knowledge, they would have served no one. The digging job had to be done daytime when the noise of the city life would overkill the whacking of the pick and shovel. We faced another big problem. If we managed to carry out the plan, what would we do with the removed soil? We couldn't just dump it in the back yard. We didn't know how other people handled the situation because nobody talked.

Mother's ingenuity proved to be admirable. "How about filling the steps to the basement," she said, "now that we have a new entrance."

The architectural plan was ready. We only needed a builder. Mother turned toward our Gentile confident, Kornel. He sent us a man who was willing to make our dream come true -- a tunnel with a mud seat for three. We removed the firewood from the trapdoor of the cellar to the other end of the back hall. Milo cut a hole in the ceiling directly above the toilet seat and tied a long heavy rope to one of the rafters. The purpose of the dangling rope was twofold. Pails of soil destined to be dumped into the cellar would go up during construction, and we ourselves would slide down in case of an emergency.

The stranger brought his tools after nightfall and came to work in the morning. While he was inside, the padlock was hanging on the outside. Mother and I pulled the heavy pails up, carried them down the ladder, emptied them into the basements steps, and climbed up again with the empty pails. Milo would help whenever he could but he never stayed longer than a few minutes.

Mother paid the stranger the 400 zlotys he was promised. We were now in his and Kornel's hands. One of these men could easily give us away during the forthcoming (there was no doubt about it) "action". But we trusted Kornel and he vouched for his friend. We even pre-arranged with Kornel our resurfacing from the bunker after the "action." He was suppose to stamp his feet [illegible] on the floor right above the bunker to let us know when it was safe to come out, which he did later in accordance with Mother's instructions.

Again the trapdoor was covered with the old rug and we carried back the firewood. The word "action" was on everybody's lips and minds. For the cobblers and their customers it was the only subject of conversation. Neither the Council nor the militia tried to mitigate the public opinion.

The fabrication of the bogus Aryan papers was going very well. Mayer Gruenfeld who used to own a book and school supplies store, somehow got a hold -- probably through a Gentile who worked in the registrar's office -- of personal papers of people who died or emigrated years ago. Gruenfeld and his partners would tear off the picture and replace it with the photograph of the person in question. They falsified artfully the missing part of the seal and sold these papers as identification documents. In desperation many women and girls bought them. Not many men took this route. All the Germans had to say was, "Drop your pants," and the man's Jewishness was uncovered. Gentiles were not circumcised in Europe.

I noticed that Mother became chummy with a neighbor lady with whom she had always been close but whom she seldom saw during the occupation. All social relationships had been cut off. No more Sabbath afternoon teas and no other visits. Mrs. Rein had a daughter a few years younger than I. The two mothers resolved that their daughters should buy the forged documents and leave for the Aryan world. Milo supported Mother. Their argument was that he as a man could not do it, and she as an older person had to wait for her death together with her son. I opposed the plan not only because I did not want to leave them but also because of my Jewish physiognomy and Gusta Rein's Jewish inflection in her pronunciation of Polish words. Mrs. Rein insisted that with Gusta's Aryan looks and my correct Polish accent we'd help each other and would survive together. I did not trust that prognosis and did not want to hear about the plan.

In autumn of 1942 Jews had to give up all their furs for the benefit of the German soldiers who were freezing on the eastern front. The *Judenrat* was given ten days to collect the furs. Many Jews burned theirs but a certain quota had to be delivered and it was done under the usual German threats.

Days ahead of the deadline Milo who seldom walked the streets, had the bad luck of meeting the most savage German policeman. Milo was wearing a coat with a fur collar. The Schupo man went into a rage. He threw the boy to the ground and kicked him around with his shiny boots most probably cut and sewed by the victim.

"*Verfluchter Zyd,*" yelled the *Volksdeutche* (Germanized Pole) in his half Polish and half German language. "How dare you wear fur when our soldiers need it?"

Luckily Milo didn't suffer any broken bones. We washed and bandaged his cuts and bruises and he recovered quickly.

In our cold Polish climate most everybody owned some kind of fur. For daily use, sheep skin lining for coats was very convenient because it was cheaper than wool. The council fearing German reprisal, urged deliveries, but most people withheld at least part of their furs. So did we. The best items we gave to Gentiles for safekeeping.

After the deadline the majority of the Jews did not replace the fur collars with fabric. Like the white armband with the Star of David, the naked underlining became another badge of Jewishness.

CHAPTER 19

In the middle of October 1942 a ghetto was imposed. Since Skalat was the seat of the county offices, Jews from the whole county which included many villages and two cities, Podwoloczysk and Grzymalow, had to move to Skalat. There was no doubt that the preparation for a big "resettlement action" had begun. No matter how unbearable and hopeless the situation was, a few optimistic voices could always be found: God would not forget us. A miracle would happen. The Messiah would suddenly arrive. It didn't prevent others from building bunkers and buying fake Aryan papers.

Jews who lived outside of the assigned ghetto borders had to leave their homes. We were lucky again. We could stay in our house but we had to take in, just as everyone else who didn't have to move, some of the newcomers. Soon the ghetto was filled to the brim. At night all the floors were covered with living bodies. Those of the out-of-towners who brought furniture, had to leave it outdoors.

We gave shelter to two families from Podwoloczysk, the Glaesers, a couple with three children ranging in ages from six to thirteen, and a middle-aged couple, the Kleins. I can't say they moved in. They walked in, loaded with many suitcases and packages. They hoped to use the contents for years to come.

The resettlers who arrived in the ghetto the last day or two before the deadline, had to go straight to the synagogue, the gathering place for the victims.

Ben Glaeser and his wife looked like people already defeated by fate but their teen-age daughter didn't see it that way. Full of vigor and pep, she swayed from foot to foot, shook her mop of curly hair, and giggled constantly crinkling her nose. She tried to show off her little moles of breasts that nosed up from under her tight blouse. She acted much more so when Milo was around. Young Irka treated me like an old woman and she was right. Some girls of my age took care of their appearance at times of slackened terror. They would roll their hair in curlers, wear lipstick and socialize. I never did. My clothes were clean but my short braids hung down along my ears as they did since the beginning of the German occupation. Irka showed me her beautiful wardrobe though she realized that most of it was too small for her. She was growing fast and new clothes were not available for Jews. She asked me to exchange my eskimos (Milo had made them to replace my stolen winter footwear) for her rubber zipper-boots. I agreed. I felt compassion for her great hopes of a future full of nice feminine trinkets.

Hitler allowed us only five days to get acquainted with our tenants. For full five days children's laughter resonated over our walls overwhelming the clamor from the cobblers' shop. I'll never forget the pretentious teen-age squeals, the little girl's guffaws and the boy's pranks. In spite of all the alarming predictions, we enjoyed the frolics of the children.

Pajamas and nightgowns went out of style. The ghetto people slept fully dressed with one eye closed, the other watchful. There was no doubt that something would happen one of these days. The concentration of the people in one place was a sufficient clue.

I lay sleepless on October 22 as dawn began to lighten the sky. The air was stale with the odor of the ten hunted creatures whose muffled sighs and restless moans meant they all were listening and watching. Suddenly dry crackling of distant gunfire broke the silence. The dark shadows jumped up from their beds and improvised sleeping places. With an aching head and bottomless fear I threw a coat over my shoulders and stuck my feet into a pair of shoes. We were ready to run, hide, disappear. In the streaks of light seeping through the curtains I saw Milo directing the newcomers into the basement hideaway. He lifted the two floorboards and in a low but firm voice ordered them to jump down.

"You'll step right into a chair," he said.

Ben Glaeser, a young man with prematurely grey hair and fine energetic features, trembled.

"Are you going here, too?" he asked.

I felt a needle in my heart. My headache was forgotten.

"We... do... have... We have another... another place but only three people can fit in there," I said.

Milo explained that we'd wait until all of them go down, then we'd replace the boards, pull the sofa over and cover the place with bedding.

Mother, Milo and I exchanged guilty glances. My head swirled and my temples pounded.

"Take only me with you," Ben pleaded. "I want to mask this place myself, with my own hands."

We could not blame him. Maybe he did not trust us. We were strangers to him. He did not want to use the sofa. We helped him spread bedding all over the floor so it looked as if people slept here and left in a hurry. Ben shifted sheets, pillows and blankets this way and that way. We had to remind him that time was precious. Seconds ticked away. Ben turned back from the threshold with a last glance as if looking at a grave.

Milo removed the supporting beam and tore the door open. At the damp scent of the early morning air I felt like running. I didn't care where to, just away from the congestion and exhaustion. I put one foot outside but Milo pulled me back in.

"Too late to go that way," he said.

He was right. The somber grey outdoors looked empty and spooky. No people. No movements. Not a sign of life. Milo slammed the door shut, bolted it and braced it with the beam. We took the emergency route -- through the attic. I thought of the synagogue where many out-of-towners were staying. Their fate was already sealed; ours might be delayed.

Mother was the first to climb the ladder. The old rungs squeaked under her feet. She was no slowpoke but to me it seemed like ages before she reached the top. We didn't dare to put two people on the ladder at the same time for fear the flimsy structure might collapse. When my turn came, I was in shock. My hands and feet were paralyzed. My mind stayed blank. Milo grabbed me around the waist and put me on the first crosspiece of the ladder. Awakened, I flew up like a bird. Through the hole in the ceiling I looked down at the old-fashioned toilet seat that masked the entrance to the bunker, and my spirit rose. Who would suspect a latrine to be a disguise for a hiding place, especially with the door padlocked from the outside? The only difference between this toilet seat and a regular one were the leather hinges that joined the side board, the one that hid the pail of water, with the seat. The soft leather hinges enabled us to lift the side board, move the pail to the side, and crawl in. I hoped that anyone looking down would not notice the hinges or wouldn't understand their meaning.

Milo had just knelt down to reach for the rope when a thin whimpering voice "Take me with you," reached our ears. In a narrow slot between the boards that divided our attic from Goldstein's we saw a pair of horror-stricken eyes. Milo ripped off the board. It split with a thunder that made all of us shiver. If heard outside, it could have brought disaster. Goldstein's thirteen-year-old grandson was hiding behind the partition. Not until we were safe in the bunker did little David tell us how he camouflaged the entrance to the cellar where his parents, six brothers and sisters and his grandfather were hiding.

Ben, being the tallest, went down to the latrine first so he could catch each of us off the rope. Mother was next.

When my turn came, I was watching the dangling rope with a frightened eye. My hands clung to the rafter and I couldn't let go. A wild scream "*Halt Jude*," from the outside reminded me that a bump suffered here would mean nothing in comparison with being caught by the Germans. Like a stone I fell down. If Ben had not grabbed me in time, I would have broken the toilet seat. David, small for his age and an agile boy, clasped the heavy cord and, like an athlete, hand over hand, slid down into Ben's arms. My brother was the last. Mother was already down in the hole. There was not enough room for all of us in the tiny cubicle.

I went down feet first. Lying on the stomach and crawling backwards, I groped blindly for the walls of the shaft. The odor of the damp earth was nauseating. I had a short memory. I did check out the place after it was dug but I had forgotten how moist the walls felt or how musty the air smelled. After my eyes got used to the darkness, I noticed our cautious mother remembered to bring bread, a bottle of water, a candle and matches. She had supplied the other group with the same provisions. Now Milo had to mask the entrance from the inside of the tunnel. It was not an easy task. He put two narrow boards across the hole leaving in-between a small slit which allowed him to stick out his hands and place the pail back where it belonged, under the opening in the toilet seat. That maneuver deprived us of the last flash of daylight.

Mother asked whether Milo untied the rope.

"Yes, and I took it down with me," he whispered back.

Deep black silence took over the cave, a hiding place for five human animals. Enveloped in complete darkness, we did not dare to light the candle for fear of using up the oxygen. There was no room to move. I sat on Milo's lap and David on Ben's. David and I were the two shortest persons in that crammed vault but still too tall to stand up.

Our bunker bordered on Goldstein's basement to the north and our own cellar that held the Glaesers and the Kleins, on the south.

Outside Germans roared and Jews cried. The roars were wild with inhuman hate and unrestricted sadism. The cries were muffled by crackling shots and heavy blows.

Suddenly a loud bang ripped the air. I thought the mud ceiling was caving in over our heads. Mother threw her arms around me and Milo as if in a last hug. Soon we realized that the searchers had broken into the house and the beam that supported the door came down with a crash. The stampede of boots above our heads was deafening. We clung to each other in silent terror. My heart drummed. Cold perspiration ran down my temples. I could feel Milo's breath on my shivering neck. When I heard a series of clinking noises, my pulse stopped. I was sure our other hideout where Ben's family and the Kleins stayed, was uncovered.

"It's my glass and china," Mother whispered.

"How do you know?" asked Ben.

"By the sound and place," she answered. "They must have thought somebody was hiding behind the credenza. It stands on a slant and there is an empty space, a little triangle, behind it."

After the searchers left and it was all quiet above us, Milo knocked twice on the southern wall. Two knocks were returned. I heard Ben's muted, "Thank God." Mother tried to raise her hands in thanks to heaven but the mud ceiling was in her way.

Hours passed with no let-up in the hunt. Jewish screams and Germans curses accompanied by shots and whips rose like an invisible geyser of horrors and complaints. For a while my mind was blank, then wild ideas, dreams of freedom attacked my brain like gnats. At the end I gave up in resignation staring like an imbecile into the darkness.

Later we heard a new kind of clamor, muffled in the beginning then getting louder and louder. It was followed by shrieks, "*Juden 'raus,*" and by children's lamentations. It came from the north, Goldstein's basement. Ben put his hand over David's mouth to prevent him from screaming and we huddled around the little boy who had tried to save his family by offering his own life. Had he stayed in the open attic as he planned, he undoubtedly would have been found.

My fear changed to anger; anger toward our helplessness, anger toward the unconcerned world, anger toward the silent God. David did not hear the pitiful outcries of his sisters and brothers. He did not hear his grandfather calling out the Jewish martyrs' "*Shma Yisrael,*" Hear Oh Israel. He didn't hear Germans yelling "*Verfluchte Juden,*" cursed Jews, nor the whips whistling like flying bullets. He had fainted.

It was over within a few minutes, perfected with Prussian efficiency. Mother lit the candle. Ben rubbed the boys face with the water we were supposed to drink but didn't. Slowly David opened his eyes, then closed them again. Two tears shining like diamonds, rolled down his sunken cheeks.

We lost track of time. At night the cries were not as frequent and the shooting was not so near. By crawling into the tunnel and peeking through the slots between the boards, Milo established that the second day of our confinement had already begun. Every time searchers stampeded like a herd of cattle through the house, we held our breaths.

My conscience bothered me because we had pulled the ladder up into the attic. Wouldn't the hunters become suspicious? An attic without a ladder? I wasn't smart enough to figure out that they'd bring a ladder from the Bernsteins. And when they saw the hole in the attic floor directly above the toilet seat, wouldn't that give them a hint? And what about the smashed dividing wall between the two attics? Like little worms all these reflections nibbled on my nerves; I didn't share them with anyone. It was quiet during the second night but we were not ready to leave our sanctuary. I tried to stay awake. I was afraid to fall asleep and see in a dream what my eyes missed during the raid.

After two days and two nights in the cave, we heard the welcome knocks above our heads. Kornel's voice echoed, "*Pani* Rothsteinova, *Pani* Rothsteinova, come out." Ben clambered up, and Milo who hoisted himself to the attic from Ben's shoulders, was the first to greet Kornel and to unlock the latrine door. On wobbly legs, we crawled out. Wisps of white fog like ghosts, floated in the air. Kornel brought us the grim news. Two thousand people had been shipped out in sealed cattle cars on the second evening of the raid. Many had been killed outright at the gathering places, the synagogue and the railroad station, as well as on route.

The inside of our house looked like a shipwreck, furniture, bedding, dishes and clothing tangled and intertwined. It was not important. The eleven people in our two bunkers survived. Until?

Upon leaving the Germans promised to be back soon.

CHAPTER 20

The morning "after" the search began for surviving relatives. Two different schools of learning prevailed in the ghetto. One group believed families should stay together, survive or perish together. Others preferred the separation of members of the same family in different hiding places -- if possible -- so that some could survive and tell the world the truth.

The newly widowed, orphaned and parents who lost children walked the streets in a daze. People who owned bunkers did not allow small children, especially babies, to be brought in for fear they would give the place away with their cries. Many parents who had never used sleeping remedies and did not know their potency, had given them to their offspring. Twenty cases proved to be overdoses.

The ghetto was cut in size. With two thousand fewer people Jews would have been too comfortable. Squeezed together we were an easy catch. Our house was now outside the ghetto, just across the new border. We had to leave the house and everything in it -- nobody had room for our belongings -- but we considered the loss of our bunker the biggest depravation. Right away our resourceful Mother found a corner for us in one of the best houses in the run-down small ghetto.

The Rein family also survived the "Wild Action." Gusta's parents and siblings as well as my mother and brother raised again the subject of bogus Aryan papers for us. They insisted it was our last chance. Many girls had left already. There was no hope for anyone to survive in the ghetto. I still resisted. I believed that during the next "action" we would be able to hop across the street to our old bunker. Gusta was ready to go. I was under so much tension that I had moments when I was losing my lucidity. There was too much rebel in me to give in to the weakness and become submissive, yet once in a while I would experience emotional defeat and forget the need for physical security. Mother's strength brought me always back to reality. She explained to me in simple words that it would be impossible to enter the old house at the start of an "action" and I soon found out how right she was.

We moved our sofa, some bedding and clothes to the new location. Milo had to sleep on the floor. There was no room for a bed. The new place was so crowded that with the exception of the owners, nobody knew who or how many people had moved in. Until the deadline we spent most of our time in our own house.

Within the next few days some of the deportees of the "Wild Action" returned, most of them with broken bones or other injuries. They had jumped off the speeding train. One of them was my friend, Lora. She limped and was badly bruised. She and her parents were captured the first day of the raid. She had a hard time finding words to describe what was going on inside the synagogue. She thought not only heavens but the walls of the building should have been moved by the cries of the babies, the shrieks of the children, the whimpers of the old folks, the screams of the confused ones and the lamentations of those who prayed. The place was so crammed with bodies that people urinated and defecated, as they did later in the train, right where they stood. There was no elbow room.

When the door was opened, a wild rush to get out followed. Under the guard of SS men and Ukrainians the victims were driven to the meadow behind the railroad station while newly caught inmates filled the synagogue. On the meadow they suffered from cold and dampness. During dry summers and freezing winters the grassland served as a shortcut to the depot but in spring and fall it was a swamp that supplied the population with peat for their stoves. Lora sucked on wilted grass. There was no food and no water. The crowd spent the night and the next day in a sitting position. Standing was considered an attempt to escape. Those who did try to run away were caught and brought back by loitering Gentiles who enjoyed the scene.

"When the train arrived late in the evening," Lora went on, "we're so despondent that nobody cared what would happen next. All I wanted was a roof over my head and a drink of water. I got the roof of a cattle car but no water. The wagon was so packed that it was hard to breathe. Once we passed Tarnopol, it was clear we're going in the direction of Lvov. Young people kept pushing toward the window, a small square hole without glass. One after another they jumped. We couldn't see what happened to them but we heard constant shooting. I didn't think of jumping. You know I'm not an athlete."

How well did I know! She and I, two bench warmers. Although she was a few years older, we attended school together. She was kept back by World War I when schools had been closed for four years.

"I can't say that I jumped," Lora continued. "My father pushed me out. I heard his blessing 'God help you.' I rolled down a gravel embankment and landed on top of some prickly bushes. I could not believe. I was alive. I saw people leaping from the train and flying through the air. Bullets crackled all around me. I was hurting but my moral suffering was just as great if not greater than my physical pain."

Her leg was bandaged with white cloth and her arms were covered with sores.

I wanted to know how she returned to Skalat. She couldn't have dragged her limp leg for miles and miles and she could not have taken the train. With her blue eyes and light brown hair she was not a typical Jewess, but the condition she was in would have made her a suspect.

"I did limp around plenty but only at night. And some good-hearted Gentiles helped me. I knocked at doors and windows after dark or very early in the morning. No one would let me into the house. They were so scared. But some let me rest in the barn or in a shack. I had money and I paid dearly for food. One man hid me in the straw and gave me a ride in his farm wagon to the next village. They did not ask questions but they knew who I was. They saw the trains and the bodies along the tracks."

She turned her tear-filled eyes toward me. "What did I come back for? To whom?"

Besides her parents, she left on the train her sister and brother-in-law with their three children. Lora was back on the train three weeks later and did not jump.

The ghetto had become a school of learning that offered a multitude of theories: hiding together, hiding separate, hiding with Gentiles -- if one could afford it -- hiding in the ghetto for those who had elaborated, well concealed bunkers. But most of those were located out of the ghetto borders as was ours. Some Jews would spend the nights wandering in the fields although the cold November weather was already penetrating to the bones.

Families like ours who had boys in military service adhered to the concept of survival of at least one member. Mother and Milo became more persistent about buying false documents for myself and leaving the ghetto. I should do it for the sake of Jozek. All three of us were sure he would come back. I still resisted because I believed that neither Gusta nor I had a chance of survival in the outer world. A bashful simple girl, Gusta had never been away from her mommy, daddy and siblings. When her mother sent her on an errand like borrowing a cup of sugar or returning a baking dish, she'd walk up to my mother as close as possible and deliver the message in a hushed voice. She did not look into her interlocutor's face. Her eyes were always downcast.

"Who could accept me as an Aryan" I asked. "with my big nose, dark hair and dark eyes?"

"But look at Gusta," Mrs. Rein argued. "She is a perfect *shiksa*. That will help both of you."

As long as she doesn't open her mouth, I thought. She was a blond with grey eyes and a wide flat nose. And I would have to cover my face when I spoke.

"You have to take the risk," Mother insisted. "The risk of staying here is much greater. You know that we are under a death sentence here. You owe it to Jozek to try to save yourself."

I gave in. Mother sold my sewing machine and a few other things that had stayed in a safe place, and paid Moyshe Safir, Gruenfeld's partner, the outrageous price of 18,000 zlotys for the fake papers. Gusta and I were now Roman Catholics. We remembered our Pater Noster from school where we heard it twice a day, at the beginning and at the end of classes. We also had to remember our new names, places of birth and the names of our parents.

Officially we were not allowed to leave the ghetto but many Jews did; we were not enclosed with a fence or wall as in the big cities. Since I could not go on the trip wearing my raggedy clothes, I had to retrieve a few pieces of my good wardrobe from the homes of Gentile friends. Mother found a suitcase and filled it with dresses, underwear, shoes, stockings, soap, even cosmetics.

Safir assured us he knew of a trustworthy Gentile, an out-of-towner, the same one who had transported Gruenfeld's wife and their two children into the Aryan world. The man would pick us up early in the morning on the 10th of November and drive us in his horse and buggy to the Tarnopol railroad station where we would buy tickets to Rowno, his home town. Later we would meet him there and he would find jobs for us. We could not leave from the local depot because in our small city we'd be recognized immediately.

Not until after the war did I learn that Rowno was not far from Belzets, the first gassing post in the East.

The stranger would not enter the ghetto to pick us up. We had to meet him in the "outside world." I didn't know whether it was good luck, bad luck or a coincidence that Kornel's mother owned a vacant cottage across from the ghetto. She and her family spent all their lives in the Jewish neighborhood but had to leave when the ghetto was established. Later, when the ghetto was made smaller, she could have moved back, but she didn't. She didn't have to do it. Plenty ex-Jewish houses were available for the Gentiles in the city.

Daytime the ghetto borders were not watched very carefully and we spent most of our time in the old house. Our "new residence" was so crowded with people that it felt like a marketplace. The owners, a good-hearted couple, accepted everyone but small children.

"We have here," Mrs. Sommer said, "at least thirty people. With one child's scream we'll all be dead. How can we take that responsibility?"

Twilight November 9, 1942. Parting time. How does a daughter say good-bye to a mother and brother who are under a death sentence? I looked at them and they looked at me. None could find words. Neither could we find tears. They had dried up long ago. We either stood in an embrace or peered in each other's eyes. A foreign body had stuffed my throat and paralyzed my vocal organs. It was worse than a funeral where people part with cold silent bodies. Although we were all on the brink of death, we were still breathing.

With a clenched heart and fogged up eyes, I left the house. Gusta was waiting.

The cottage was located at the southern end of the city where the Jewish and non-Jewish houses stood empty. Nobody lived there and we met no one. Beyond that no-man's land was the kosher slaughter house -- not in use since the beginning of the Nazi occupation -- and farther south the great spread of wetland where the condemned endured their suffering three weeks earlier.

Kornel who had smuggled in our suitcases the evening before, left the door unlocked for us. The two suitcases stood along the wall with their handles sticking straight up, ready to be grabbed for the journey. The only piece of furniture, a twin bed, stared at us as if asking "What are you doing here?"

I sat down on the straw mattress trying to answer that painful question. I wanted to weigh the realistic problems against the sentimental ideas but I could not think. My brain was mindless. I sat in a stupor. Gusta, stretched in a prone position, lay next to me. After an hour or so, she began weeping and groaning. She jumped off the bed.

"I'm going home," she said.

I was not surprised. "I think we should," I said. "But not right now. We must wait till daybreak. You know how scared all the people in the house would be if we knock in the middle of the night?" Those were the first and only words we exchanged during the night.

I didn't know whether my heart had mellowed or my mind cleared but I began questioning my reasons for being here. My doubts returned. When Jozek comes back, he'd build his own family but my family now were my mother and my brother. Besides, any idiot would recognize the Jews in me and Gusta. I made my decision. I'm going back to the ghetto as soon as the sky showed the first streak of light. When we thought the moment was right, we put on our nice good coats that had been stored away to wait for a better future, and grabbed the handles of our suitcases. At the same time a man in shabby work clothes opened the door. He looked frightened.

"Quick. Let's go." His voice trembled. His life was also in danger. If caught, he might be killed. He tore the suitcases out from our hands.

"We're going back..." I began.

Gunfire shattered the air. A familiar signal. "Action," shrieked the stranger dropping the bags as if they were fireballs. He was gone.

As we ran north to our homes, we saw him mounting his buggy. He didn't worry too much; he had received half of his payment ahead. And we lost all our personal belongings including the expensive counterfeit papers. I was sure we'd be caught any minute but by some unexplained miracle the southern end of the ghetto had not been surrounded by soldiers as yet. The same kind of grey damp air and the same painful stillness as at the morning of the October action. Mother and Milo waited for me at the open front door, the only people in the deserted, dead streets. They knew I'd be back.

I whispered "Let's go to the old bunker," and ran toward the back door which was closer to our own house. In the open door I stared into a pair of steely eyes of a uniformed soldier. He beckoned me with his hand, "Komm." I slammed the door. He did not follow. The action had not begun.

All the inhabitants of the house were already in the bunker. We knocked at the black box that masked the entrance to the plain basement. The back hall did not have a wooden floor. It was hard dry soil. The camouflage was a wooden box filled with soil. The edges of the box were painted black. The hallway was windowless and everything looked black. Maybe that complete darkness saved us.

We were admitted immediately. We have been expected. We spent long hours crouched on the damp ground. Nobody emitted a whisper. No coughing. No throat clearing. But plenty noises from outside. Whips, curses, pings of striking bullets, and cries, cries, cries.

Named the "Small Action," it was all over in the early part of the afternoon. *Only* 900 people had been captured, among them Gusta Rein, her parents and her two brothers.

Soon I found out that the false documents were valid as long as no one checked them. Gruenfeld's wife and daughters perished. According to rumors, the man from Rowno delivered them directly to Belzec, the neighboring city.

The only dentist, Dr. Halpern, Skalat had before the war was a Jew who was killed at the early stage of the Nazi occupation. In the summer of 1942 Dr. Jan Slota, a man with a typical Polish surname opened a dental office in a nice section of the city. He did very well financially and socially. The couple were accepted in the intellectual and official circles. Their new-born baby was christened in the Roman Catholic church. Until -- somebody denounced them. They were arrested and sent to Tarnopol to the Gestapo. A local *Schupo* man smashed the baby's head against a tree. Was it better for the city to be without a dentist than be served by a Jewish dentist? Hitler decided it was.

CHAPTER 21

By orders of the *Gestapo*, the ghetto shrank again. The Jews were pushed into the poorest, most dilapidated part of the city. We had to search for another corner or rather a niche to fit our three bodies. We found a dwelling from which the people had been deported. It meant there was no safe hiding place because the bunker had already been exposed. Mother and I stepped into the front door of the cottage while another group, an intact family of five, came in through the back door. We asked them and they asked us whether the place was available, and together we usurped the two-room flat. Judging from the number of beds and cots, we concluded that the SS had reaped a sizable crop in that bungalow. And we didn't even know how many people slept on the floor.

Again, a few of the would-be resettlers jumped from the speeding train. The horror stories about the crowded synagogue, loading conditions and cattle train were the same as during the October exodus. Many jumped but few survived.

The Spring family, our co-tenants, had outwitted the Nazis by surviving until now in the rural area among Christians where they had always lived. They had a hard time adjusting to the congested atmosphere of the crowded ghetto. The eldest, Lusia, my namesake but eleven years younger, towered over me, the five footer, with her swan-neck and tall crop of brown curls. Betka had a round face of a cherub, sky blue eyes and reddish blond hair. She hoped she could pass for a Christian. Her parents did not believe in the fake documents. Too many Jews had already returned from the "other side," the Aryan world, where hordes of informers harassed, blackmailed and denounced Jews, those in hiding and those living openly as Gentiles. Betka, also a teen-ager, was a free spirit and had to be watched constantly. She would have been back in the country in no time hadn't she been restrained. Ten-year-old Dolek skirted the ghetto streets but knew his limits and never crossed into the other, forbidden side. No member of the Spring family showed any effects of the Hitler era until the father volunteered for the quarry. It was better than being sent to a labor camp. The resettlement actions never diminished the recruiting of slave laborers for Kamionki and other camps. Otto Heil had lost many workers and were glad to accept volunteers.

Mrs. Spring, like the rest of her family, smelled of fresh air, sunshine and home baked bread but she was more realistic than her children. Maybe because she spent more time with us. Our sorry state of mind was contagious. We had forgotten not only how to laugh but even how to think about anything else but survival. With the loss of Father and three resettlement actions behind us, our resistance was weakened. The Spring family had lived a relatively quiet life as the only Jews in the village where they were liked and sheltered by their Gentile neighbors as long as it was possible. When the five of them arrived in the ghetto, we had been carrying the full brunt of the occupation for almost a year and a half.

I could not forget the Glaeser children who had brought sunshine to our house for a few days before the "Wild Action." They perished in October in the so-called "Small Action." Although the Spring children displayed a great deal of fervor and enthusiasm for life, it did not reflect on us. We lived as if we had been born into slavery.

Mr. Spring was a domineering husband and domineering father and tried unsuccessfully to dominate us. In the meantime we had to take in another couple. We had been living in forbidden luxury -- eight people in two rooms.

The Handels were also country people used to open spaces. They had moved into the ghetto when they had been forced to do so, a few days before the "Wild Action." We all suffered from adjustment problems.

Mr. Spring found a match in Mr. Handel. The two men often bumped into each other and verbal fireworks exploded. After a few repeated performances my mother stepped in. She was the oldest person in that commune and demanded respect. Her angry words effected a relatively peaceful atmosphere.

"You aren't any better than Hitler," she scolded them. "He gathered the Jews in the ghetto so he could easily catch them. He's smart. He knew that crowded conditions will bring fights and quarrels and that would work toward his benefit."

Mother expected misery to unite us, not divide. And she was right. All three men, Spring, Handel and Milo began working on a new bunker.

The house had a lean-to neglected small utility building where we found all kinds of tools and a great deal of junk. The mud floor was covered with straw and pieces of broken parts of farm and industrial equipment. We did not clean; we did the opposite. We added to the mess whatever we could to cause confusion for the would-be searchers. We hoped that the pile-up would effectively mask the crucial point, the entrance to the bunker.

During the typhoid epidemic of the previous winter the Jewish militia used to check homes for sanitary conditions and didn't allow to collect junk but since the "actions" they let people take care of their own health. We dumped the removed soil into the old basement that had been exposed during the last raid. Milo who had experience with camouflage, played the architect. The finished bunker seemed reasonably safe but assurances did not exist. Lusia spent evenings flirting with a young boy who would come over from the next house where he lived with his mother in another commune, and Betka and Dolek listened to their youthful jabbering. Sometimes Lusia would go over to the boy's house and the children would have to put up with our company, the adults.

After a few weeks people began talking peace -- there will be no more "actions". There were none during the winter but hauling men off to camps had not stopped and the Heil company still employed Jewish slaves at the quarry. We were sheltering Milo although the cobblers shop did not exist anymore. His sewing machine had been deposited in a safe place and we hoped the council would reopen the shop for the benefit of the poor and the quarry brigade. Simon Handel followed Mendel Spring's example and volunteered for the quarry. Mr. Handel realized that refugees, out-of-towners and all other strangers were the most vulnerable people. The members of the *Judenrat* took care of themselves and their families first. The next protected group were the extended relatives, then friends and associates and at the very end was the general population.

The strangers figured only in the post scriptum. The degree of care depended on personal whims of the particular Council member. The council didn't hide the truth anymore. All the able-bodied men would go to the camps and work as long as they could and the rest were sentenced to immediate death.

In the meantime daily life in the tiny ghetto had to go on. People still had to eat. We had left some provisions and firewood in the old house and were bringing it to the cottage little by little. To avoid quarrels Mother set special rules for attendance in the communal kitchen. Only the three housewives had access to the cooking stove. Men could cook only with special permission. The girls did supporting work at the kitchen table and washed dishes. We hoped to avoid confrontations especially after discovering Mrs. Handel's habit of blaming everybody else for her mistakes or wrongdoing. She would never confess to anything broken, spilled, misplaced or... pilfered. Even a slip of her tongue wasn't her fault, somebody else put the words into her mouth.

The *Gestapo* declared Skalat free of Jews but there were still more than a thousand Jews living in the crowded ghetto. The prominent German Otto Heil Company that would have lost the source of their cheap labor with the liquidation of the ghetto, intervened at the *Gestapo* in Tarnopol on the behalf of Jews in Skalat. The German company asked for and received permission to employ the so-called "quarry squadron." But where would these workers live? Not in the ghetto which did not exist according to the German books. The Jewish Council was ordered to open a camp for the quarry people on the outskirts of the city in an old distillery that had served as barracks for Austrian soldiers before WWI. Originally the camp was supposed to house only the men who worked at the quarry but little by little it grew into a regular labor camp. With the threat of annihilation hanging over Jewish heads, everybody wanted to get into the camp. The Judenrat had already experience in haggling with Germans. The men in the camp needed a kitchen, a laundry, cleaning facilities, a shoemakers' shop, a tailor's shop, and so on. Expensive gifts and plenty of bribes worked.

Milo had been staying out of sight. As soon as the camp came into existence, Mother talked to Zimmer. He agreed on the necessity of opening a cobblers' shop in the camp. The sewing machine, brought out of hiding, became the property of the camp and my brother got his job back. He was now an inmate of the camp which was considered good luck. The rush for acceptance to the camp was just as forceful as the chase after work papers was in earlier days. A few weeks later the doors opened for women. Mother began insisting, as she did about Aryan documents that I enter the camp. And I should do it right away before another seamstress got in. Being the irredeemable egotist, I gave in -- of course for the sake of Jozek's return from the war. It broke my heart to leave Mother in the ghetto. But she was not alone. The men, Spring and Handel, lived in the camp as members of the quarry brigade but the women and children stayed in the ghetto. Every house was a commune. The trend was to form larger groups. It seemed shared misery was easier to endure.

I was admitted to the camp at an early stage together with the ghetto "socialites," wives, sisters, girl friends and relatives of the members of the Council and militia. The few "chartered inmates," I among them, had their own beds and bedding, but the girls who joined the camp later had to sleep on tiers of double bunks covered with straw. The last, the Small Action, was over during daylight and the robbers missed their chance to plunder as they did after the Wild Action which ended nighttime. With the opening of the camp everything was transferred from the Jewish homes to the huge camp yard where it rotted until the return of the Red Army.

The camp had one important advantage -- it was under Jewish command although officially a branch of the infamous Kamionki. Two or three times a week Roebel, the head of the Kamionki camp, would come with a few of his cohorts for inspection. On those days panic took over the inmates. Many of the women had to go into hiding because the camp housed more females than Roebel had approved. The Jewish management, trying to save more people, had greatly overdrawn the permitted number of inmates. The Germans always stopped first in the office where commandant Russ kept the best drinks and refreshments prepared for them. More than once they got so drunk they forgot about the inspection. But when they did remember, they played out horror scenes. Like madmen they waved their whips right and left yelling and swearing, swearing and yelling. Men were beaten for cutting wood too slowly, for a glass panel with a finger mark or for not taking off the caps fast enough upon the approach of the dignitaries. I watched from the window of the tailor shop and asked myself whether it was their expression of hate, frustration or sheer entertainment.

Some of the privileged women had brought their own kitchen utensils and cooked their own meals. There was always a way to smuggle in provisions for those who could pay the high prices. My brother and I depended on Mother's deliveries. And so did most of the inmates who still had relatives or friends in the ghetto. Although officially Jews were not permitted to leave the ghetto, they were not prevented from bringing food to the inmates at the time the workers were returning from the quarry. Mother's first question was always the same, "Did the SS come today?" We're lucky again. The SS whips never touched me or my brother. The ghetto people were not allowed inside the gates and we were not allowed outside. Mother had aged very much since Milo and I left for the camp. Looking at the crowd waiting at the gate with their pots and packages, I saw miserable old creatures with white armbands. And my mother was among them. Everybody seemed to be of the same age -- about ninety.

A few of the top leaders of the Jewish Council which was supposed to be dissolved, now had residences outside the ghetto. Only Bumek Russ, the commandant of the camp, lived in the same building as the inmates. The white armbands with the Star of David had outlived their usefulness for the camp Jews. Only the ghetto people wore them. Our emblem was a yellow patch, a symbol brought back from the Dark Ages.

All the "elite" women wanted to work in the tailor shop but there was hardly anything to sew. Most of the time we sat around the sewing machine and jabbered. None of the women overworked herself in the camp. We didn't even have to rise for the early morning roll call as the men did. The men had it much worse, especially those who worked in the quarry. Russ had received training instructions from the SS. He was supposed to keep up the German discipline and he tried his best to be an obedient servant.

The commandant of the women's division, Cyla Weisselberg, was not an angel, but was bearable. I never had any close dealing with her but those who did, didn't like her. Both commandants, she and Russ, could not afford to be soft on inmates for personal reasons. Their own heads were at stake. Cyla did not face the Germans as often as he did. I had known Russ during the Soviet occupation when he used to come to the bank to ask for credit for the institution he worked for in Grzymalow. He was always a jellyfish, a yes-man and a boot-licker, and now he added to all his values savage brutality. Every day at sunrise he ran around the infamous *Appelplatz* (roll call plaza) swishing his whip (and using it sometimes) and yelling at the men. Maybe the Nazis had promised him "life after" if he followed in their footsteps.

CHAPTER 22

In February 1943 I was summoned to the camp office. I had never been to the office and I was not guilty of breaking any of the camp rules. Yet I got the jitters. My knees turned wobbly. I was pleasantly disappointed. *Herr* Hefner, the *Landrat*, the head of the civil administration, needed a seamstress for his family. Why not use free labor?

Every morning except Sunday, the fancy carriage, after dropping off the *Landrat* at his office, would stop at the front gate of the camp to pick up the seamstress with the yellow patch on her coat. I still had a good coat, the one I wore during my planned escape from the ghetto. Hefner lived in a palatial country estate where a few Jews worked and moved around freely without white armbands or yellow patches. Officially they were listed as inmates of the camp although they had never set foot in there. They were the so-called "useful Jews." Now I became one, too. Useful for

Hefner's pocketbook. The Jewish governess, Runia Fleschner, was tucked away in the safest possible place, in a room adjoining the bedroom of Hefner's two little daughters. A father and son team tended the pigs. As strangers in the community, they passed for Christians. When summer came, somebody noticed their white feet. It was customary for farm workers to walk barefoot in warm weather. Only Jews had white feet because they wore shoes all the time. The two men were neither talkers nor minglers and their co-workers became suspicious. The day they were asked the reason for their white feet, they disappeared. There was also a Jewish carpenter and a few other "lucky" ones. Their Jewishness was no secret.

Edward Baras who later became my husband, was the working administrator but Bakaluk, the Gentile, carried the title and received the wages. Ed and the Gentile gardener shared a cottage. The gardener, who had a family, lived in an apartment with a kitchen. Ed had only a furnished room with a separate entrance from the hallway. Hefner's cook prepared three meals a day for all the single employees.

The mansion was furnished with Jewish belongings from chandeliers to carpets, from bedrooms to kitchen. I was shown into a room stocked with dry goods like a well established store. On one side printed silks mingled with checked cottons, tulips and roses peeked from light and dark percales, and smooth taffeta shimmered in bright sunlight that bathed the room. Along another wall two-tone tweeds, twilled gabardines, and solid woolens rested stack upon stack. There would have been enough work for one person for years to come.

I was introduced to my first customer.

"This is *Fraulein* Lusia," said *Frau* Hefner to her four-year-old daughter. "She'll make new dresses for you."

"*Guten Morgen*, *Fraulein* Lusia," the girl said, bending one knee.

She could have been a darling child if her father did not exterminate Jewish children who were just as cute as she was. Nevertheless, I could not blame the children and even learned to like them.

I worked in a spacious, airy room with the view of the flower garden. Most of my time was taken up making clothes for Gretchen and her three-year-old sister Maliese. They loved the transparent marquisettes, the embroidered batistes, and the stiff organdy dresses with the balloon-sleeves. I wondered what great parties they would attend wearing all that finery but they went nowhere. They stayed around the house or in the garden most of the time and got themselves dirty, always under the supervision of Runia who kept changing their beautiful clothes. *Frau* Hefner's sister who also lived in the mansion, took care of her baby boy herself. He was too young for a governess or fancy clothes.

The Polish maid, Mania, brought my meals to my room three times a day. Jagda, the housekeeper and cook was always busy but would stop once in a while for a short chat. Neither of them spoke German and this was the reason high-toned voices were heard often around the house, especially coming from the kitchen. The uncivil conversations would change into shrieks and screams, sometimes in Polish but mostly in German. If Runia was close by, she served as a translator. I served in that capacity only if the problem was brought to my room. I was never called to the kitchen or any other place to perform this duty. After dinner Jagda, with the knowledge of the lady of the house, would fill a dish or two for me to take home. They knew I had a mother in the ghetto and a brother in the camp.

Jagda and Mania were addressed by their employers with the familiar German *du*, but in conversations with Runia, Ed, or me, the Hefners used the polite *Sie*. Jagda and Mania, the paid servants, were constantly submitted to verbal abuses and insults, but the three Jews hiding from the SS murderers in the house of a prominent Nazi -- yes, Hefner was a member of the Nazi party -- were treated with normal courtesy. While we were in their house, we were people. But had Hefner met one of us in the ghetto during a raid, we would have been doomed. For the time being we were "useful Jews." The Hefners saw the difference between the semi-illiterate Jagda and Mania and the progressive Jews but it didn't mean anything on doomsday.

Hefner had privileges. There was no doubt that the *Schupo* knew about Jews working on the estate. There couldn't have been any secret about my daily trips. Hefner's carriage passed in front of the police building on the way to and from the camp, and my yellow patch was clearly visible. Hefner's Jews were not hiding from the local German authorities only from the SS and Gestapo in Tarnopol. In between "actions" Hefner played the gentleman toward his Jews. On raid days he donned his Nazi uniform and did his share in the ghetto.

The winter of 1942-43 passed without resettlements. The war in the East was going badly for the Germans, and the Jews began to hope. Maybe, just maybe, Hitler would be beaten before he killed all the Jews. But the Nazis did not stop the slaughter until the day they were forced to withdraw.

The Germans had good weather forecasters. It never rained on their "actions." The seventh of April was a bright sunny day without a cloud in the sky or wind in the air. Early morning shots boomed from the direction of the ghetto. The quarry brigade did not leave for work and

Hefner's carriage did not call for me. Most camp inmates had relatives or friends in the ghetto. Milo and I and everybody else either paced the yard impatiently or leaned against the wall in a stupor. I trusted the bunker we helped build would hold out. The silence around me was devastating. The camp building was empty. Everybody was outside waiting near the gate for news. The hours dragged on endlessly. In the afternoon Gentiles notified us that 800 people were shot a few kilometers north of the city where trenches had been dug a few days earlier by peasants on orders of the Germans supposedly for the purpose of storing gasoline. Camp policemen were sent to the ghetto. They brought back a list of victims. Mother's name was not among them.

There was no time for mourning. The next day the quarry gang hued stones in Nowosiolka, and I attached frilly hand-woven lace to the hems of little dresses.

The ghetto was doomed. Milo and I began thinking how to get Mother out. She lived with a group of women whom I hardly knew. During the winter the Spring family moved out. Mrs. Handel had also left and other people moved in. It was a true commune. They shared food, tears, pain, and maybe sometimes a ray of hope.

When I arrived at work the morning "after," Jagda informed me that Ed's parents had been captured. He never came to my room but we talked daily through the open window. Next time I saw him, he revealed to me a story so gruesome that my primitive mind could not comprehend.

His siblings had notified him about the fate of their parents. He decided he must see the grave. Early in the morning he mounted his horse and rode to the place of execution. He tied his mare to a tree and walked around the three mounds of fresh graves sparsely sprinkled with lime. Suddenly he heard moaning coming from one of the graves. He followed the direction of the sound and noticed a wriggling finger sticking out as if trying to dig itself out. He attacked the ground with his bare hands. The soft, thin layer of soil gave way easily and in no time did he pull out a naked teen-age girl. She was covered with sores, scratches, mud, feces, mucus and blood but she was breathing and seemed to be conscious. He covered her with his jacket and ran toward the road where he stopped a farm wagon that was carrying produce to the city. With the help of the peasant he took the girl to the hospital where the nuns washed and cleaned her wounds. The Polish doctor, Strzalkowski, declared her to be in shock.

Ed could not stay. He had to be at work. He returned in the afternoon but was not allowed to see the girl. Only her father, David Epstein, was with her. The nuns informed

Ed that the 17-year-old Rebeka might recover and probably would be permitted to talk the next day.

In the morning a few people gathered in Rebeka's hospital room. Besides her father and Ed, there were a few other Jews, friends or relatives, and a nun.

"The synagogue was very crowded," she began in a barely audible voice. "We were pressed like sardines. Doors and windows were closed. Everybody was covered with perspiration. Some prayed, some cried, some screamed, and some, like I, bit their lips and waited for death."

The nun asked Rebeka to rest for a few minutes but she didn't listen. She seemed to worry she might not be able to finish.

"After a few hours of that agony," she continued, "the doors opened and we're driven out like cattle to the slaughter house. I was puzzled. During the last two actions the people went to the railroad station but we're going in the opposite direction, to the north." She had difficulty breathing. She stopped for only a minute.

As Ed related it to me, the rest of the story was told almost in a whisper.

They marched in a procession, five in a row, honoring their own funeral. The soldiers pushed them forward.

"*Schneller*, *Schneller*, faster, you children of death."

A few horse-drawn wagons carried the sick plucked from the Jewish hospital.

"We crossed the marketplace," Rebeka went on in a whisper, "and the main street. The Gentile population lined the sidewalks a few rows deep. I wondered if they enjoyed the show."

In 1944 when I met Kornel Kuchtiak after the liberation, he told me that many Gentiles had rejoiced during the pogrom of July 1941 but their enthusiasm for Jewish blood diminished with the progress of German cruelties.

Seeing the open trenches, many people began to pray. There German screams "undress" drowned out the loudest prayers. The cries of the victims echoed around the great expanse of the field and rose toward the clear blue sky. Those who did not want to undress were beaten with butts of guns and bayonets and kicked into the pits alive. Children were also thrown in alive. They covered the bottom of the trenches. A board across the pit served as the place of execution. Four Jews in their innocent nakedness were forced onto a board, a salvo of gunfire followed, and corpses fell in. Sick adults who could not stand up for the shooting procedure, went to their graves alive.

Berl Wolowicz, the 20-year-old son of a rabbi, a scholar in Jewish and secular studies, would not undress.

He died with the words "*Shmah Yisrael*," on his lips. Yanka Margulies, the 17-year-old beauty also did not want to shed her clothes and met the same end. Rozia Pickholz, an exceptionally bright woman with a college degree, did undress, then stepped in front of the naked crowd to give them courage to die. She spoke in Yiddish which contains many German words.

"Be strong," she said. "The world knows that innocent people are dying here. We'll be revenged."

A soldier poked her bare buttock with his gun. "You are not people," he said. "You are vermin."

"Thousands of gallows are waiting for you, murderers" Rozia called out in a loud voice. While he was raising his hand, she managed to slap him in the face. He stuck his bayonet into her stomach.

Some, like Rebeka, did not receive a direct hit and fell in, unhurt.

"It's hard to describe what was going on down under." Her eyes billowed up with tears. "The scratching, the scraping, the wheezing, the choking ..." She was one of the last victims. She received very little soil coverage and that's how she was able to reach to the surface and grope for air.

As Ed told me, there was no dry eye in the room.

Rebeka died two days later. Her father buried her in a single grave in the Jewish cemetery.

All the resettlement "actions" were baptized with special names. The 1941 raid of the fifth of July was named the Pogrom. In August 1942 we gave up a Living Contingent in contrast to the Gold Contingent we delivered to the Germans a year earlier. In October 1942 we experienced the Wild Action and the November one was named the Small Action. The April 1943 massacre was christened the Wailing Graves.

Some details that Rebeka did not reveal were determined later by Jewish and Ukrainian police. *Ordnungsdienst* was exempt but a few of them got undressed and went willingly on the boards after discovering family members among the crowd. Kuba Migden, the second in command of the militia, spotting his wife, child and mother-in-law naked, joined them. So did Efraim Spazierer when he noticed his two children on the board.

On the morning of that critical day the SS had ordered all members of the Jewish Council to appear at their office at noon. Some were smart enough to ignore the order. The trustful ones perished.

The Councilmen walked to the killing field as the hundreds did earlier in the day, to their own funeral. They had to close the trenches filled with the still wriggling bodies. When they finished, they were shot. Jewish and Ukrainian militia covered the last grave.

Officially, this was the end of the Skalat ghetto. The Jewish Council was not needed anymore.

But there were still Jews living in bunkers. My mother was one of them.

After the liberation the story of the Wailing Graves was confirmed by witnesses, curiosity seekers who watched from behind trees, bushes, and stalks of tall wheat and rye. Also many Ukrainians confessed to participation in atrocities alleging they were forced by the SS to do so.

CHAPTER 23

Again, the city was declared free of Jews, and this time it was definite. Every Jew found alive and not an inmate of the camp, was brought to the city jail by the Ukrainian police. From there they were chased in small groups to the Jewish cemetery where they had to dig their graves.

Again, there were still survivors, including my mother, burrowed in holes in the ghetto. The flow of food, especially cooked meals, from the ghetto to the camp, stopped. Those who had money or exchangeable objects would buy from the Gentiles who began to show up at the gate of the camp with food at sky-high prices. As a result of co-operation between the underground ghetto management and the legal camp administration, the kitchen turned out a bit more substantial soups.

Jagda still prepared sandwiches and warm dishes for my mother and brother but I had to find a way to deliver the food to the officially non-existing ghetto. I did not know how much Yurko, the coachman, could be trusted. He was not a man of words. When we rode together, he was perched on his high driver's seat and I occupied the honorable place in the back. He seldom answered my good morning or good-bye. On the first trip I asked him to hold the horses way ahead of Mother's dwelling so he would not know which house I entered. Later he stopped right in front of the cottage. I had realized that he saw me opening the door because the ghetto was very small and Mother's house was at the border of the Aryan side. I had to take the risk. Without exchanging words, Yurko proved himself a real friend.

A week later Milo and I managed to transfer Mother to the camp. Dressed in man's clothes, she was smuggled in with the quarry detachment returning from work.

Other inmates also brought their loves ones. At first it was done secretly, then half openly. During German inspections the illegal ones had to be hidden. When I was at work, my friends would cover Mother with high piled bedding in our bed. She faced the wall and had a small opening for breathing.

The ghetto sufferers, besieged by hunger, lice, rats, mice and stench, began emerging from their bunkers little by little. Some people would leave the ghetto for the night and return after sunrise. They remembered that all the previous actions had started at daybreak. Many roamed the fields. Others found refuge in a barn with or without the owner's permission. Tired of tramping around and always hanging on to a ray of hope, the ghetto dwellers came back to life gradually. More and more Jews were staring out the windows, even walking the streets. The Germans were waiting for that moment.

In the meantime a group of young men and women tried to organize a resistance. They got in touch with a Pole who claimed to have connections with a national freedom group. The Jews gave him all the money they could collect and received twelve grenades without kindlers and a promise of a revolver. Soon the Polish charlatan disappeared. The revolution of the sharpened butcher and kitchen knives never materialized.

The ghetto was pulsating again but this time without a Council. The Gestapo sent ten Jewish policemen from Tarnopol to soothe tempers and calm the atmosphere.

"Not to worry," the newcomers advised. "The remaining Jews are safe ... there will be no more actions. The *Gestapo* promised. We'll keep order here from now on."

June 6, on the holiday of Shevout, seven weeks after the Wailing Graves action, the Germans surprised the inhabitants of the ghetto in the middle of the day. At the same time they ordered Russ, the camp commandant, to send twenty men to the killing field where the April massacre took place.

The extermination process ran the same course as before; only the assembly place was changed. Instead of the synagogue which had been vandalized and showed gaping windows, the condemned were gathered in the market square and surrounded by SS and Ukrainian police.

The camp stayed mute and lifeless on that day. Hefner's carriage did not call for me. The work brigade did not leave for the quarry. We worried not only about the ghetto people but also about the twenty camp inmates.

With the usual Nazi luck -- it never rained on their "actions" -- it was another sun-filled day. Late in the afternoon, leaning against the wall near the gate in solemn silence, we noticed our men returning to the camp. The glitter of the setting sun emphasized their bloody clothes. They fell into the straw of their bunks without uttering a word. The next day they had to be prodded before they were willing to relay to us the details of the previous day's happenings.

While the SS men were busy in the ghetto collecting the sacrificial lambs for Hitler's altar, the local German police were preparing the scenario in the field. The camp inmates were ordered to dig a ditch ten meters long, five meters wide, and three meters deep.

"All we heard was '*Schneller, schneller*,'' the spokesman for the group, Yankel Perlmutter, told us. "Schneider, the chief of the *Shupo*, repeated a few times, 'Nothing will happen to you if you work fast. The job must be finished by noon. You are safe.' But Morland whispered to us, 'Your turn is next. The camp.'"

Morland was the only policeman who reciprocated a little for the bribes he received. He sometimes warned of a forthcoming disaster.

"When the victims were coming closer to the field," continued Perlmutter, "we're told to get out of the hole. The ghetto people wore their white armbands and we had the yellow patches. The shirt I had under my jacket also had a yellow patch. It was warm and it was not suspicious that I took off the jacket. I figured that jacket could save a life. Suddenly I saw my brother being chased toward the open grave. But I was chased in the opposite direction away from the graves." His voice broke down and he began to cry. When he recovered, he told us he managed to pass the windbreaker to a ghetto man but not to his brother who was too far away. "After ... after you know what, we had to cover the grave. That's when I noticed that Megus Rothstein wore my jacket. With the yellow patch, he was one of us. He's now in the camp."

Within the next few days other men of the twenty grave diggers began talking. They had to collect the bloody bodies around the field -- some were killed before the official shot rang out --and they also had to carry to the trenches those who arrived dead in the horse-drawn buggy.

After the Ukrainians and most of the Germans left, three SS men stayed behind and checked the discarded clothes for money and valuables. The camp inmates loaded all the articles, pants, dresses, underwear, outer wear, shoes, belts, eyeglasses, and frames with or without lenses, into wagons. The confiscated Jewish possessions became the property of the Nazi government.

This one was named the Liquidation Action which it was. It was the final blow for the city Jews. The Ukrainian police prowled the streets and fields in search of those who missed the net. Again, the arrested Jews were kept in the city jail until the group was large enough to be taken to the Jewish cemetery "for disposal." Not enough Jews could be found for mass burial in the killing field. Those buried in the cemetery had only small mass graves. But, as in the field, they walked to their own funeral and dug their own graves. And there were no Jews to cover them. The Ukrainians did not have jurisdiction over the camp and could not use the inmates. They belonged to the SS. The job of closing the Jewish graves in the cemetery fell to the newly organized city *Baudienst* (Building Service). This institution had to overlook the demolition of the Jewish homes and the selling of parts. Seemingly covering Jewish graves was part of the building code.

The next day Hefner's carriage called for me later than usual. I was worried. I was worried even more when the vehicle arrived with the *Landrat* in it. I had always felt uncomfortable in that carriage especially when a Jew gaped at me as if I collaborated with the Germans. But on that day I did not expect to meet Jews. The city had been declared *Judenfrei* just a day earlier. Was I ever wrong!

I mounted the steps of the coach and mumbled, "*Guten Morgen.*" He mumbled back something. I sat down opposite him with the back to the coachman.

"*Hier, bitte,*" he said, moving to the side and showing me a place next to him.

While I was sitting in the official carriage with the highest ranking civilian Nazi in the county, I saw two Ukrainians, guns on their shoulders, leading two elderly Jews chained together by the wrists. One of them was our neighbor, Samuel Wallach.

They saw me. As long as I live, I will never forget those mournful faces. My heart jumped to my throat and my head fell down to my chest. I did not know what was deeper, the pain or the guilt.

The camp returned to the old routine but under greater stress.

"We're next," was repeated everywhere.

Panic and hopelessness hung over our heads. Especially in the evening, when nobody worked, the mood was dark and heavy. Heads spinned, nerves prickled, conversations did not gel.

Mother seldom saw Milo. Men were not allowed into the women's hall and vice versa. The food from Hefner's kitchen I delivered to him in his shop and after work I walked with him in the yard, something Mother could not do. As an illegal, she had to stay indoors but she looked at us through the window.

The inspections by Roebel and his deputy, Mehler, had not changed. Some days they ate, drank, took the gifts and left. Most of the time they fell into a rage and terrorized the inmates.

One day after lunch Mrs. Hefner asked me to take the measuring tape and follow her into the dining room. The centerpiece of fresh flowers perfumed the air. Hefner sipped his coffee. The table was covered with leftover food in china and crystal dishes. Did he bring those from

Germany? I asked myself. It was all Jewish, confirmed by Jagda.

Hefner wanted me to sew pajamas for him. I had never worked on nightclothes, but neither had I worked on children's dresses. I was an expert on ladies' wardrobes. I had to accept the challenge but I didn't care to survey Hefner's dimensions.

"Don't you have an old pair that I could use for size?" I asked.

He did not have any. He probably outgrew his clothes -- in the width. In all likelihood, he never had it so good. I took his measurements and he said, "*Danke schoen.*" It was hard to believe it was the same man who ran around in the ghetto during "actions" in a Nazi uniform catching innocent Jews.

CHAPTER 24

The evening of the 29th of June the prophecy everybody hoped would never come true, turned into reality. One moment we saw Russ strolling in the yard which served as the *Appelplatz* in the morning and as the corso in the evening, with his beautiful girl friend. She was half his age and had the innocent look of an angel. The next moment the bomb exploded. Morland, the Schupo man who had lately turned into informer for the Jewish cause, signaled the warning.

From mouth to mouth the cry went, "Tonight is the night."

The camp administration disappeared leaving behind the message, "Save yourself if you can. Everybody on his own." Mother, Milo and I sat down on the bed saying good-bye to each other. Inmates gathered around relatives if they had any. A group of young boys decided to leave although they didn't have any idea where to go. Mother and I insisted that Milo flee with them. He was only nineteen and in good health. He had to survive for the sake of our Jozek who was coming back from the war.

Mother and I ripped off our necks the little pouches that Father had filled with valuables before the Germans entered the city. During the comparatively quiet winter of 1941-42 Milo had placed the contents of these bags in a tin box which he walled in after removing a brick in the old house. When the ghetto was established and we began wandering from place to place, we put the bags on our necks again. Now we dropped them into Milo's coat pocket. It was a warm night but he never parted with his winter minus-fur-lining-and-fur-collar jacket.

The November scene when I was supposed to leave for the Aryan world, repeated itself. There was no tear in any eye, only desperation in every heart. It could have been a business like good-bye. We had become brutal realists. Mother and I would stay and accept what comes. We had gotten used to the idea that we must die and we didn't hold out much hope for Milo either. Nobody flinched. Nobody batted an eye. We embraced, and he was gone.

About an hour later he was back. With a group of other boys they had jumped the tall fence on the darkest part of the yard. They were soon attacked by a band of hoodlums who threatened to turn them in to the police if they didn't go back to the camp. We looked out the window. In the dim moon light I saw the thugs circle the building.

Milo stayed with us in the women's hall. So did many other men. No more rules. No regulations. No supervision. We're free to go. The doors were not locked. You stay -- you die. You go -- you die. Let's make it easier for ourselves. Fold your arms and wait for the butchers. All around us the few beds and the lower tiers of the bunks were filled with mechanical figures staring in resignation at the darkened walls.

Milo had lost the two little bags with our treasures while jumping over the fence. So what? We would not need them anymore. Instead of enriching the Germans, a Pole or Ukrainian would find them.

It was still pitch dark when Milo's friends called for him. They decided to try again. They hoped the hoodlums had finally gone to bed. More embraces, more hugs, tears choking the throat but not coming out. What does it matter? Today or tomorrow? The earth is so ... o ...o.. big but no room for us.

Hours passed in deadly, fearful silence. It fooled even the Germans when they arrived. Who would have believed that a building which housed a few hundred prisoners could be so quiet, almost as if it were abandoned?

It was before sunup. The sky in the east had barely begun to lighten when a truckload of soldiers pulled up to the front door, the office entrance. From the men's barracks which faced the street, people saw the Germans huddle in a consultation. One of them leaped off the truck, climbed the three steps in one jump, opened the door a crack and listened for a short while, then hopped back into the truck and they drove off in the direction of the city. The Jewish interpretation which proved correct later, was that the perfect silence scared them, they suspected a trap, and went to the *Schupo* for help.

After the war when I learned about the Warsaw uprising, I understood the apprehension of these SS men on that fatal -- for us -- June morning. They were afraid of running into a Warsaw-style booby trap. At that time we did not know about the uprising but they did.

Electrified by the discovery that the soldiers fled, the inmates began to run. On a momentary decision I grabbed Mother's hand. Out we went through the back gate. So did many others. It was almost daylight, but most residents of the city and villages were still sleeping.

"Let's try Hefner's," I said. "I wonder if she'd let me in."

We found ourselves on the main road, the same that had brought the SS to the camp. We dashed for the first side path that led north. We had to circle the city and stay away from houses. We slunk behind gardens, orchards, and outbuilding. Suddenly an old peasant showed up on the path going in the opposite direction. Mother froze.

"Keep moving," I muttered between my teeth. "We must greet him."

He stopped about ten feet in front of us, his eyes and mouth wide open as if staring at a vision, then he stepped to the side. The wheelbarrow full of garden tools which he dragged behind him, blocked our way.

"Blessed be Jesus Christ," I declared in a loud clear voice. "For ever and ever," Mother chimed in her impeccable Polish. I preferred the Polish language over the Ukrainian hoping that the man would take us for poor Poles in view of our city clothes. Most Ukrainians lived in the country.

Slowly and uncertainly, the man raised his hand toward his forehead. He made the sign of a cross over his heart but didn't say a word. We went around the wheelbarrow and proceeded in the northern direction. We did not look back until much later. Whatever would be, would be! Roosters crowed, dogs barked, hogs grunted, chickens cackled. Life was returning to the countryside. We moved into the fields. We drifted along tall rye and wheat stalks and hovered among wind blown grasses. When we suspected danger, we crawled behind bushes. For most of the time we're not sure whether we're going in the right direction. Finally we saw the mansion in a distance. A decision had to be made. Mother could not go with me to Hefner's. She had to stay in the field and wait for me. We picked a spot where the wheat seemed to be the tallest and Mother lay down there. If Mrs. Hefner let me in, I'd be back at the end of the workday. If she did not, I'd be back soon. I did not believe she would send me to the SS. I scrutinized the maple tree that stood close by, trying to imprint it into my memory so I could recognize the place when I returned. A hug and a kiss and I left. Parting was getting less and less ceremonial.

When Jagda saw me, she opened her mouth into a big circle and her eyes almost jumped out of their orbits. She knew what was going on. *Herr* Hefner had gotten up early that morning and put on his Nazi uniform. He wore it only on "action" days.

"I must ask Mrs. Hefner if she wants you today," Jagda said.

The few minutes I waited seemed an eternity.

"Come in." I could not believe my ears, but it was Jagda's voice. Where could *Frau* Hefner get free labor like mine? She never complained about my work. As customers go, there would always be someone who'd grumble and ask for alterations. Not *Frau* Hefner.

I was put in a different room, one that faced an isolated backyard. A Jewish doctor, Frederyk Sass, was sitting on the couch. Besides "Good morning" we didn't exchange a word for the rest of the day. Before the war Dr. Sass held the office of county physician, a government job, rarely afforded to Jews. As assimilated Jews, the couple did not associate with any of their co-religionists, and as rich people, they stayed away not only from common folks but also from the middle classes. They considered themselves an exclusive social rank, a rank of their own. I did not know whether the non-Jewish "elite" had accepted them. He was a good-looking young man while his wife was just the opposite. Two spindly legs supported her corpulent body, and her huge head with Cyrano's nose sat on her neckless torso. She often strutted along the main street with her eyes toward the sky not noticing or not wanting to notice any passersby. Now she and her child were, like so many other Jews, in hiding while her husband secretly (it was forbidden by Nurnberger laws) took care of the health of a Nazi family. According to the servants, most of the furniture in the mansion came from Dr. Sass's house.

Even if the atmosphere had been conducive for conversation, the doctor would not have talked to me. We were not of the same social stature although at the moment we were both in the same racial boat -- hiding from the Nazis in a house of a Nazi.

Jagda and Mania carried in the sewing machine and placed it beneath the window. They also brought the pieces of the umpteenth pair of pajamas I was working on. But my mind was not on Hefner's clothes. I hardly did any sewing on that day. I hoped Mrs. Hefner didn't expect it from me. Anyway, she never checked what I did day by day.

When the meals were served, the doctor's plate was put on the coffee table, and mine on the sewing machine. I spent the day with my back to him. After each meal he paced the floor for about fifteen minutes with a measured step, then lay down to rest.

Ed came over to the open window a few times during the day. In a way we were glad about the change of the room because Ed had easier access to this part of the house.

The workday was over. I had to find Mother. And after that ...? And what about Milo? My head was swirling.

Frau Hefner stopped me on the way out. "Don't go back to the camp," she said. "There will be another action, and probably soon. You can sleep here in the attic."

I could not believe my ears. But first I had to find Mother. And where will she go? I ran to Ed's room and to my pleasant surprise, found Milo there. Another reunion though we did not know what the next hour would bring. I did not accept Ed's and Milo's offers to accompany me on the search for Mother. Wandering around was always more dangerous for men than for women.

It was still daylight when I left. I could not recognize the place. As if a broom swept over by brain. There were so many maple trees, and they all looked the same. I scurried over the undulated ground up and down the dry, baked by the sun, soil, I crossed a small patch of a meadow. More majestic maples. The shimmering leaves fluttered carelessly in the wind. "Mother. Mother," I called. No answer. I circled one tree, then the next. "Mother. Mommy." I did not remember seeing so many maple trees before. Did someone find Mother and handed her over to the hunters? I pushed that thought away from my mind and kept trampling around. I stared at the fluffy dandelion balls scattered by the wind and dissolved into nothingness. I called "Mother" - into nothingness. After rushing from one tree to the other and stumbling over fallen branches for about half-an-hour, I found her. Another reunion. For how long? Again, I shoved the question into the back of my mind. Mother ate the food and drank the water I brought her, and asked, "What now?"

It was getting dark. We stole over to Ed's room without meeting a soul. Ed had in the meantime made an arrangement with a poor widow, Vasilowa, to take in Mother and Milo for a few days for payment in food. When I was sure everything was settled, I went to my new home -- in Hefner's attic.

Three days later Ed found out from the villagers that the camp was functioning again and Jews were working at the quarry. Thanks to Morland's warning and rapid departure of the soldiers in the early morning, half of the camp inmates succeeded to escape. Those who stayed and accepted their fate were mostly strangers, old people and women, including commandant Russ' girl friend and her mother who were out-of-towners. The forlorn souls who drifted around in the fields, loitered behind farmers buildings, lingered among stalks of the next harvest, came back to the only place that would accept them, the camp. There was a roof, tiers of bunks filled with straw, water to drink and clean up. The Germans were glad to see the Jews together. The SS even sent food from Tarnopol. Hungry Jews emerged from ghetto dungeons, from ravines, crevasses and other hideouts and joined the revived camp under a new commandant. The Otto Heil Company still needed cheap laborers.

The widow Vasilowa insisted that Mother and Milo leave. Ed gave her some more provisions he was able to swipe from the estate. When Milo heard of the revived camp, he left. Mother stayed.

CHAPTER 25

Every day Vasilowa reminded Mother she must leave the attic. Hiding a Jew was a crime punished with death by the Nazis. Some Gentiles saved Jews for a high price but I didn't have anything to offer. I lay on my comfortable bed in Hefner's attic and worried and worried.

The attic of the mansion, full of Jewish furniture, had regular size windows, nice floors but no ceilings, beds with firm mattresses, and smooth silky quilts. I reflected about my family and guilt hit me with a torrential force. Father, gone forever in the most brutal way. Mother whom Vasilowa threatened to throw out any day. Jozek, a soldier in the Red Army ... who knows? Milo in a camp that's expecting extermination in the near future. And I, not hungry, not thirsty, not cold, working for a Nazi who employs a few Jews useful to him but sends others to death. I watched the shadows swirling on the wooden planks and thought of other attics. Why couldn't I find one for my mother?

Suddenly I recalled one of Father's customers from the village of Okno. He had a Polish name (we trusted the Poles who were also persecuted by the Nazis, more than the Ukrainians), Tomasz Zielinski, and often lent a sympathetic ear to the Jewish cause. He was a rich farmer. That little bit of junk Milo carried in the bag on his neck wouldn't mean anything to him. Yet I had to try. I collected all my courage and asked *Frau* Hefner for two days off.

She was surprised. "Where would you go at such uncertain times? Don't you feel safe here?"

I told her the truth.

"By all means, go," she said. "And I wish you luck." She kept silent for a few minutes. "You know ... I wonder ... Why do your people go so willingly to their death? How come they don't resist?"

I felt my blood congealing in my veins. "With their bare hands?"

"I see," she said and turned toward the kitchen. She told Jagda to prepare food for me to take along for the road.

I could not go to a village in my city dress. It would be bad enough to masquerade as a county girl with eyeglasses and sandals in places where everybody had good vision and ran around barefoot. Ed took me to a farmhouse where I exchanged my city clothes for a country outfit. I gave away my good garments of blessed memory, those I wore when the Wild Action saved my life (while others lost theirs) from the hands of an impostor who had promised to transport me to the Aryan world. They included the coat, the dress and a girdle. In return I received a beige-brownish skirt made from a produce sack and a blouse of the same quality.

I left early the next morning and tried to walk barefoot but to no avail. Every little stone, every small pebble, every tiny grain bore holes in the soles of my feet. I put on the sandals I carried in my hand and cut across the fields. The tall wheat hid my short stature and I felt safe until I had to cross the highway. I was still not far from the mansion. The sun was only a sliver of gold on the horizon. I did not expect traffic to be a problem. I peered out carefully from between the stalks of grain to check the road when suddenly from behind the bend sprang out Hefner's horses pulling the carriage. Yurko looked straight at me. The honorable seat was empty. Shocked, I drew back into the thickness of the wheat stalks. Did Mrs. Hefner sent Yurko to deliver me to the *Schupo*? I did not believe, she needed me and liked my work. It was an unfortunate incident. I had to trust Yurko as much as I trusted her. After all, Yurko knew about the bunker in the ghetto where my mother and other Jews were hiding, and did not blabber to anyone.

As soon as the coach was out of sight, I took off my sandals -- the paved road was almost smooth -- and stepped out into the open world. The wind churned the highway dust into powdery swirls and my legs were soon covered with grit. My feet did not look very white anymore but I felt safer on the other side of the road where I submerged myself into a plot of rye. I had never been to Okno. I only knew I had to go in the southeastern direction. The sun was pouring melted gold into the fields and onto my head. My tongue felt like a piece of leather in my mouth. From the position of the sun I judged it was passed noon. In front of me was a large meadow full of weeds, wildflowers, a few bushes and one tall tree at the other end. I would be very visible there. Thick tangled grasses covered the ground with a deep carpet. A few well-fed cows grazed and some rested under the tree and bushes. Expecting to meet a shepherd or two, I took off the sandals, tied them together by the buckles and flung them over my shoulder, country-style. I did wear them among the rye stalks where I felt almost secure. Hot, tired and thirsty, I sat down behind a bush and took out my sandwich.

A little boy, not more than six or seven years-old, rose from behind another bush. He approached me slowly, hesitantly. A few steps in front of me he stopped without taking his eyes off my food.

"Hungry?" I asked.

He nodded his head.

"Have water?" I asked.

He ran away and came back with an earthen jug and a tin cup. The warm water tasted as if it had been heated on the stove but it wetted my dry mouth. I gave the boy my bread.

"How far to Okno?" I asked.

With his mouth open, he chewed his bread hastily and did not answer. When he finished eating, I asked again. He shrugged his shoulders and spread his arms in a position of "I don't know." I put on my shoes. My feet were burned and prickled by nettles and thistles. I aimed at the tree where I noticed a ribbon of a road winding in the southern direction. When I reached the narrow path, I took off my sandals again. I had to talk to a human being and ask directions.

Standing in the shadow of the lonely tree was a small, shrunken from age woman with a pitiful look in her withered face. On her right shoulder lay a stick that she supported with both hands. From the front end of the stick hung down a bundle wrapped in a kerchief, and from the back end, her shoes. She stared at me with wide open eyes. Strangers were not often seen in the fields and villages. It took me a second to decide what language to use. The population was mixed. I greeted her with Jesus Christ in Polish.

The woman answered "For ever and ever" in Ukrainian.

I was not sure about the expression on her face. She was either surprised or suspicious or both.

I switched to Ukrainian. "Where does this road lead?"

Pointing with her head, she said, "This way to Okno, and that way to Ostapie."

"Does it go all the way straight to Okno?"

"You see that little chapel down there? You turn right and you'll see tall poplars on both side. That goes straight into the village."

With a sigh of relief I watched her turn toward Ostapie. We parted with a Christian greeting. One thing I was sure about -- peasants never used greetings like good morning, good evening, good night or good-bye. Now I had to figure out how to avoid the chapel where I might meet worshipers. It was not a real chapel but a wooden crucifix under a small roof. Many of those had been erected at crossroads for the benefit of travelers who stopped to kneel in prayer. I plunged myself into a corn field where the tall stalks swallowed me. This shortened my route and I emerged at the edge of the village. Now I faced the biggest obstacle. Which house? No street names. No house numbers.

No name plates. I did not want to approach adults and I was glad I didn't see any. A child showed me the house.

The sun was already changing from an egg yolk to an orange when I entered the Zielinski cottage.

As if a bold of lightening had struck the family. As if a ghost had invaded the house. The children were called in from the garden. They had to stay in the house to make sure they would not be interrogated by the neighbors. Yes, they had heard about the German atrocities, yes, they felt sorry for the Jews, but no, no, no, they could not hide my mother. They did not mention payment. Their lives would be in danger. The Germans threatened with the death penalty for saving Jewish lives. Although I did not hold any great hope for a successful result of my trip, I felt my heart bleeding inside my chest. I knew Vasilowa would chase mother out into the street one of these days.

I was allowed to stay overnight and was offered supper. My throat was locked but I gulped down some warm unboiled milk, straight from the cow. Bedding was spread for me on top of the baking oven which served as a bed --especially on cold winter nights -- in every farmhouse. Early in the morning I was treated to a sumptuous breakfast of boiled potatoes, sour milk and bread and was sent on my way.

On the return trip I got lost and did not get back to Nowosiolka until after darkness. The back door was locked.

There was light in all the windows as well as in the kitchen. I heard laughter and loud voices. I began to worry. Maybe the SS have a party in the mansion. I hoped the guests would leave. After waiting in the bushes for a very long time, I knocked at the servants' entrance. Gladysz, Hefner's chauffeur, a *Volkdeutche* (a foreign-born German; in this case a Pole), who knew me well because I had worked with his wife in the Soviet bank, came out of the kitchen into the back hall, and seeing me through the glass-paneled door, turned around and ran away in a hurry. I could imagine his shock -- a Jew on Hefner's doorstep. A few minutes later Jagda let me in and I clambered up the steps to the attic. In the morning Ed informed me that we'd have a few days' respite; he had given Vasilowa some sausage and a bottle of vodka. It caused more worries. Communication between him and the widow could become suspicious. The situation was desperate.

CHAPTER 26

It was the middle of July. The intensity of daily sunshine and nightly rains forecasted excellent crops. On one of these cloudless days the blue sky in the north sent out echoes of small gunfire. There were no German fighting forces around only many kinds of police: political (*Gestapo*),safety (*Schupo*), criminal (*Kripo*) and Ukrainian militia. It was past the Stalingrad battle. The Nazi army was in retreat but the front line was still miles and miles to the east from us. Where did the gunfire come from? People wondered. Soon farmers brought news that Soviet partisans were prowling the Nowosiolka forest. The fact our region did not contain any large woodlands made the event more remarkable. The timber industry was very small and hardly any furniture factory existed. Locally made bricks served as the only building material. Poor people used clay mixed with straw in the construction of their cottages.

Why wouldn't the Russians look for a big forest to hide? As we learned later, they had good reasons. They knew there was no military power in the neighborhood but plenty supplies.

The presence of the partisans poured new hope into disheartened Jewish soles and fear into the German hearts. *Frau* Hefner and her sister packed a suitcase, the three children, took the indispensable Jewish governess and fled to the hospital under the care of the ever compassionate nuns.

I sewed in my room, not knowing what was going on.

Ed came in. He had never done that before. "Come," he grabbed my hand. "The Russians are here."

I thought he lost his mind but I followed him. In the middle of the courtyard I saw a gathering of farmers and workers.

"See those in the center?" Ed asked. "Those are Soviet partisans. It's hard to believe. But they are Russians."

Men and women in civilian clothes dressed in rugged cotton pants and worn-out shirts, some with canvas shoes and some with sandals on their bare feet, rifles over their shoulders, pistols and bullet belts on their hips, entertained the peasants with a seemingly friendly conversation. They did not waste time. They asked for the keys to the warehouses.

Everything had happened in minutes. Before fleeing, Bakuluk, the official administrator of the estate, fearing the partisans would break the locks, offered Ed the keys to the storage rooms and the distillery. Ed refused to accept the responsibility. The Russians shot out the locks, ate and drank as much as they could and a little more. From the stables they seized the best saddles and the finest horses and loaded them high with supplies.

Milo brought reports about the excitement among the camp inmates. He stayed only a few minutes. He was eager to join his friends in the celebration of the first day of freedom. They followed the partisans who seemed to be everywhere. Nobody was able to figure out how many roamed around. In the city they burned the building of the *Schupo* and broke into the Ukrainian cooperative store where they equipped themselves with everything from clothes to shoes to food.

But they were mainly after arms. They didn't find any.

The next day they rummaged through Hefner's house poking holes in swastikas of the flags and armbands which they later burned. One of the men donned Hefner's Nazi uniform and imitated Hitler.

They turned a deaf ear to the suggestion of some peasants that they go after Hefner's family hidden in the hospital.

"We didn't come here to kill women and children. We are looking for German military men."

But all the Germans, military and civilians, had gone underground.

The camp Jews, together with the partisans, feasted for two days. On the second day, Sunday afternoon, Milo was back at the estate with the disappointing information that the partisans were leaving and the camp inmates were begging them to be accepted.

"We'll take anyone who has a gun," was the answer.

Nevertheless about two dozen stubborn boys and girls followed the Russians and managed to wriggle themselves into admission.

Not until after the war did we learn that this group of partisans consisted of a detachment of the army of general Kolpak who decided to hit the enemy from the back. In the Karpathian mountains that small force was decimated by German bombs, tank fire and hunger. On their return in fall, they joined a group of Jewish partisans that operated in the forests of Ostapie and Krecilow, not far from Skalat. Of the two dozen partisans who followed the Soviets into the Karpaty six survived.

By nightfall the Jewish freedom was over and so was my boarding term at Hefner's. I was afraid to go back to the empty house which the villagers had plundered, robbed, vandalized and left in disarray. They finished what the partisans had begun. I advised Milo not to go back to the camp. All three of us, Ed, Milo and I imagined the inmates would suffer the wrath of the Germans more than ever before. I ran into the sewing room for the last time, grabbed a nice piece of woolen fabric and ran off to Ed for consultation. It was decided that Milo and I should try to join Mother, that Vasilowa would be enchanted with the fancy remnant good enough for two suits. With Ed as mediator, the case was settled. She would keep us a few days but she expected more food supplies from Ed. He, sure of his position with Hefner, returned to his room.

We were together again. Resting on a bed of straw, we asked each other, "What about after the few days?" We knew that Ed could not pay for our upkeep. The next day the widow did not talk about food anymore. She talked about her fears. She heard how dangerous it was to hide Jews and she wanted to get rid of us. Two days passed and Ed did not show up. We realized that once we walked out of her house, there would be no tomorrow for us. The Germans would not leave one Jew alive when they hear about the marches around the city and fleeing with the partisans. But the *Gestapo* congregated the Jews again as they had done after the first camp action. The hungry creatures, not seeing an end to their wanderings in the fields, came back. Food was sent from Tarnopol and the Otto Heil Company favored the quarry brigade with employment. Again stones were cut, loaded into trucks and sent to Germany. Vasilowa tried to talk us into going to the camp, but I remembered Mrs. Hefner's warning, "There will be another action soon."

Finally it happened. Vasilowa said, "This is the night. You must leave." We had heard that some Jews lived in the woods but didn't have any idea in which direction to go. We hastened toward a dark spot on the horizon reckoning it must be the forest. The star-spattered sky was helpful but we had to walk slowly; Mother, who had not used her legs for a few weeks, could only hobble. About an hour later we found out that the dark line on the horizon was a row of stony hills that rose against the black sky in jutted silhouettes. The lower parts were cowered with scrawny bushes, but -- where was the forest?

My heart sank. Prickly weeds muscled their way through the open sandals into my bare feet. The cool wind blew pockets of air under my thin blouse. It had been very hot daytime under the thatched roof of the cottage. The sudden exposure to the cool night drained every feeling of alertness from my body and mind. I hallucinated. The gold-dotted canopy above our heads was not helpful anymore: the millions of stars were the search lights looking just for us. Mother's watchful eye noticed my condition. She wrapped me in her shawl and Milo's coat.

My brother spotted a soft light at the foot of the largest hill and we went in that direction. It was a window of a small cottage. According with war regulations, all the windows had to be blackened, but this one was not. The yellow clay floor gleamed in the dim light of the kerosene lamp. In one corner a man lay on a bed under a military blanket, in another stood an open trunk that seemed to contain the family's possessions. A smoke covered cooking pot steamed on top of a tiny tin stove. A woman with a crying baby in her arms walked the few steps up and down the small room. It dawned on me that the stony hills we just saw were the quarry and that Jozko, the watchman, whom the quarry workers praised as a compassionate man, lived in the cottage. Without hesitation Milo opened the door to the stable which was attached to the house. The odor of animal sweat and excrement hit our noses with such a power that we drew back for a moment. But only for one short moment. We were cold, tired, desperate. The warmth of the smelly stable was inviting. We plunged ourselves into the sticky, stinky straw next to the pig with the cow across from us and closed the door. I fell into a nightmarish slumber.

As the first flickers of light seeped through the crevices of the shed, Jozko appeared next to us. He was a young, rugged, weather beaten man in shabby, dirty clothes, unkempt and unwashed.

He was neither surprised nor mad. "You can't stay here," he said in a mild, soothing voice. "I'm too close to the quarry. If they'd look for Jews, this would be the first place they'd check." He was as polite with words as he was rough in appearance.

He showed us the road to the Nowosiolka forest which seemed about a kilometer away. We crossed an exposed field until we reached a path that squirmed up along a steep ravine on one side and a row of low bushes on the other side. The tall grasses swished around our legs, and the ever-rising sun licked the dew-diamonds off the leaves. By the time we reached the forest the sun was out in full blast, warming our backs and promising a nice day.

The forest broken by clearings cluttered with raw-cut stumps and dead weeds, consisted of tall, thick, old trees with protruding roots. It looked more like a chain of meadows than a woods. No two trees were close enough to one another to touch crowns. The foliage reminded me of the trampled football field across from the Skalat depot. Only when I kicked a dried-up fir cone, did I realize I was in a forest.

But where were the Jews that supposedly lived here?

After a few hours of aimless wandering we noticed a caravan of clouds nudging and snooping each other in the darkening sky, threatening with rain. A few minutes later the gray blanket over our heads presented us with a few heavy drops that soon changed into a drencher which was probably much appreciated -- after the last heat wave-- by everybody but the homeless Jews. Huddling under an enormous oak tree didn't help much. The water oozed down in a delicate sprinkle one moment, in a thick spray the next. When the downpour slowed down to drips, we renewed our search for the fellow Jews but not before wringing out our wet clothes.

Soon we came upon a stone formation overhanging a cluster of bushes. On one side the moss covered rocks looked like a group of mounds with the largest resembling a dog's head topped with one horn. The other side sloped down to a lower level where the overgrown weeds hid a small opening. A worn-out path led from the clearing to the mysterious hole in the grey greenish rock. On his tip-toes Milo cautiously approached the opening. We saw his head leaning more and more toward the inside until we lost him from our view. He had crawled in. A few seconds later he came out smiling.

"There's an apartment waiting for us," he said.

I was glad to hear a joke, the first in a long, long time. He had found a two-room natural cave. The "vestibule" was the size of a cubic meter and the second hole a bit larger, enough for the three of us to sit in a compressed position. Tired and hungry, we crept into the cave and crouched closely to one another for physical warmth and spiritual support.

The opening between the two chambers was on the same side as the entrance which gave us the advantage of sitting in the second compartment without being seen if anyone stuck his head into the mouth of the cave. The solid ceiling boulder was covered with moss but tiny blades of light shot through narrow chinks between the side stones. We fell asleep. When I woke up, night had already overtaken the forest. I declared that I was going to see Ed and would be back soon with food. There was no use in opposing me. We had to try the last straw. We did not want to die of starvation just as we did not want to die from German bullets. I hoped I would not meet anyone because of the curfew and because the villagers of Nowosiolka had a reputation as quiet, decent people. I was not sure about the route but I trusted my intuition. Mother persuaded me to delay the trip until evening because it was almost daybreak. I agreed. What's one more day of fasting? We spent the rest of the night outdoors and the day in the cave.

In the evening I bent a small branch of the nearest tree as a marker for my return. Besides, after having circled the forest so many times the previous day, I lost my sense of direction. Mother and Milo wanted to wait for me outdoors but I warned them of the cold night and advised them to get inside. Mother threw her shawl over my shoulders and I left.

Alone under the bejeweled sky, I looked up the sickle of the moon and tried to recollect my school studies. Was the moon supposed to give me a hint where east or south was? I did not remember. I had to depend on my hunch. When I heard a dog barking, I perceived I was on the right trail, going toward the village. Later I recognized the ravine that led to Jozko's cottage and I took the other turn.

The dry grasses hissed under my feet. Crickets chirped. The smell of wildflowers scented the air. What a wonderful world to live in! My ear caught a ripple of flowing water and soon I noticed the shimmer of a tiny stream. It was narrow and I jumped over to the other side where I came face to face with an old man leaning on his cane. I intoned my usual Catholic greeting in a loud voice.

He supplied the answer, "For ever and ever." Then he added, "Hey, young girl, would you help me? I can't find the bridge. It should be somewhere around here." He waved his cane over the surface of the water.

"Sure," I said. "Here it is." A beam was laying across the trickle of water. I took his hand and led him to the other side. He thanked me but my heart was pounding.

It was pounding even more when I was nearing the house where Ed lived. My suspicion rose. The few days I stayed at Vasilowa's with Mother and Milo he did not show up. I stepped into the hall, looked at the door, and the sight stifled my mind. A padlock that looked to me as big as the swastika on a Nazi flag, was hanging down from an iron ring. I had a premonition. In desperation I knocked at the next door, that of the gardener's.

"Ed had to leave in a great hurry," he told me. "The local people put all the blame on him."

"Blame for what?" I asked.

"For the damages."

"But you know it's not true. You were there. You saw everything."

"I told Hefner but he did not believe me. He believed the villagers. They told him that the Jews came from the quarry and from the camp and plundered and Baras let them do it."

"Hefner imposed a 800 zlotys prize on Ed's head," added the gardener's wife. "So, we warned him to leave."

Ed did not have a prepared hiding place though he knew many farmers. He believed that he would sit out the war working on the estate.

I stood there not knowing what to do with myself. How do I go back to Mother and Milo empty-handed after that long journey? The couple must have guessed my thoughts and gave me half a loaf of bread. It was my first begging act. I asked if they could spare a bottle and they gave me some water. I was on my way, and more in a hurry than before. I hugged the bread and water under the shawl and pressed them to my bosom. I was carrying a treasure. The light breeze blowing in my face brought the scent of the forest. I wished I was there already. I crossed the stream utilizing the primitive bridge. I could not afford to endanger my valuable bundle by a high jump.

Suddenly four men grew out like from under the ground in front of me.

"Look! A Jewess!" one of them yelled.

In my sickly image they looked like giants.

"Come!" the same man said.

I did not move.

The man began walking toward me.

"Where to?" I asked.

"To the militia station," he answered.

Their lack of guns encouraged me. They were no members of militia. In my first attack of fear I considered them to be giants, but when I got hold of my senses I realized those were kids, probably teen-agers. In the city it was a dangerous age but in the villages young boys stayed under the influence of their parents until they got married.

"And what will you gain if you take me to be killed?" I asked.

There was no answer. I was thinking about my hungry mother and brother waiting in the cave, and about the bread. At the station they'd want to know who gave it to me. I would not tell. The kindly gardener would suffer for helping a Jew. I'd have to get rid of the bread before I entered the militia post.

I decided to haggle for my life especially that I seemed to have only one enemy among the four boys. Suddenly one of the silent ones came closer to me, scrutinizing my face. He drilled me with his eyes. Terrified, I felt lost. He inspected my potato-sack skirt, my shawl, my sandals.

"You know who she is?" he turned toward his friends.

"Who? You know?" the others asked.

"Don't you recognize her? The one who travels in Hefner's carriage."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. Look at those glasses. She just changed clothes."

"You're darn right, you smartie."

I was sure I would not see Mother and Milo any more.

The boys huddled together for a few seconds and I heard the tall, the one who checked me out, say, "We better let her go."

I had already backed off a bit. Hearing those words, I took off like a storm. I could not believe that Hefner's name saved my life. Maybe they thought that everyone who rode in the *Landrat*'s carriage deserved to live. I ran and ran and didn't stop to check whether they followed me. I didn't hear them. I only heard my heavy breathing, the hammering of my heart and the thumping of my feet against the dry ground. I did not rest until I hit the first tree of the forest.

The moon that was supposed to guide me had disappeared behind the clouds. In the darkness every tree looked the same. I was sure I was aiming in the right direction but I could not find the broken twig that I had prepared as a marker. I circled a few trees, then lay down on the grass to wait for daylight. I fell asleep. I saw myself being led into an open grave and heard an order. "Jump." But I did not jump. I leaped into the air. I was awake and alive. And next to me rose the dog's head with the funny horn on top. The broken twig I could not find in the darkness, was sitting at my feet. I was "home." I felt a new burst of life penetrating my whole being. I had been in the mouth of the beast, and I am alive. The three of us had a reunion worthy of most civilized cavemen. We held a great party with food and drink -- bread and water.

CHAPTER 27

A few days later, when the growling of our stomach's could have been heard in the village, a voice called from the opening of the grotto, "Are you in there?"

Stiff with fear, we didn't answer.

"It's me, Jozko." He crawled into the first compartment. "Why are you sitting here and suffering? Why don't you go to the camp?"

We told him the Germans were assembling the Jews in the camp for final extermination.

He shook his head in disbelief. "I talk to them every day at the quarry. They don't complain. They say they get enough food."

Hunger hurts; food is the best magnet. But we did not fall for that enticement and explained it to him. Milo still carried on his neck the last pouch with our "valuables." We gave it to Jozko who promised to bring us food and water. The next day he brought a chunk of bread and a bottle of water and on Sunday a cooked meal: six potato-filled *pierogi*. This was our weekly supply.

After about two weeks of this diet we decided we should go at night to Kornel who lived at the northern edge of the city and ask him to sell some of our belongings. In the meantime he would provide us with food. It would not have made sense for all three of us to go and Mother was the only one who knew where he lived. And Mother it was. She appointed herself as the only capable delegate and insisted on going alone. Milo had to stay behind because he was even more Jewish looking than I. And I had to stay because I was, according to Mother, more Jewish looking than she. Her hair was grey and her dark eyes had lost their luster; they had turned green with light edges around the irises. We exchanged clothes. In the long sack-skirt, with her hair braided and tied together on top of her head she should have easily passed as a Nowosiolka peasant. We agreed that she should go daytime because she looked like a typical old farm woman.

She hugged us. "See you in the evening."

I thought God had never made a more perfect day than that of July 27, 1943. The spotless deep sky was disturbed only by the dazzling sun pouring down those golden rays, the symbol of life. Life ... for whom? Milo and I stood on top of our "dwelling" until Mother disappeared behind a curve in the road. We returned to the hole to wait for her. I was full of hope. Mother possessed a streak of determination that showed up in important situations much more than in the trivia of daily life. She was the iron beam of our existence.

Night fell and we talked ourselves into believing she stayed overnight at Kornel's and would return tomorrow. That tomorrow never came.

The day after tomorrow wild rumbling noises reached our ears early in the morning. At first it sounded like pounding of a hundred drums in the distance, and it was coming closer and closer. It was not thunder. The day was bright and clear. A stampede of a cattle drive? Not through the forest. We heard tramping of thousands of heavy boots mingled with human voices. We moved into the corner as far away as possible from the mouth of the cave and held our breaths. The earth reverberated under the load of the rushing crowd. When they galloped over our heads, I was afraid they'd break through the stony dog head and crush us. It would have been an easier and less degrading death than mass execution. The tragedies of multiple burials were magnified by the problem of suffocation when not enough bullets were used. Bullets cost money.

I was sure our last moment had arrived. That posse would not miss us. A very visible worn-out path was leading from the clearing to our "door step." I was not afraid of death but of physical pain and humiliation. And wanted very much for some Jews to survive and tell the world the truth. An end to the Hitler era would come. When? But the end of the Jews seemed real. Who would describe the slaughter of a people better than the Jew who lived in that period? I was a criminal not only because I was born Jewish but also because my parents and my grandparents were born Jewish. Historians would attempt to reconstruct facts on the basis of interviews with Gentile witnesses but would they know what the victims felt, what thoughts they nurtured in their minds? How their hearts were bursting with pain for the loved ones left behind? Could bodily pain overcome mental anguish?

Did the search last an hour or ten? I did not know. My mind was numb. "There will be a next time," I thought.

Later in the afternoon Jozko stuck his head into the cave. "Are you still there?" He was surprised. He had given up on us. "Are you ever lucky! This is the best known love nest all over the county, and they missed it."

My and my brother's "luck!" We had slipped through the holes of the Nazi net a few times already. Should we congratulate ourselves on our "good luck?"

We told Jozko about Mother and he gave us the answer. The next day after she left, the second camp "action" took place. She must have stayed overnight and was caught the day of the execution. Militia and civilian hoodlums combed the neighborhood fields and delivered their "findings" to the trenches. Today's posse of peasants was supposed to finish all searches.

"I didn't expect to find you here," Jozko said again. "Your Jewish God sure took good care of you."

We were the two chosen people!

Jozko must have considered us indestructible. "You can't stay here. Tonight I'll take you to the Maliniak. Many Jews live there."

He came and brought bread, water, a tin cup and a spoon. Soon we were out of the small Nowosiolka forest. We ploughed through tall stalks of rye, wheat, and corn, and glided through the shorter plants of oats and buckwheat. Before crossing the highway that led from Skalat to Podwoloczysk, Jozko took precaution. We lay down and crawled. He was forbidden to be outdoors at night and we were forbidden to be alive. After an hour's march a black line that looked like a hole between the horizon and the sky became visible.

"That's it," said Jozko. He hadn't uttered a word through the whole trip. "The Maliniak."

The forest was growing in my imagination much faster than in reality. We were still a long way from it but I wanted to be there already. How do people live in the open? What do they do when it rains? They probably have many caves to hide in. In Nowosiolka we did not get wet sitting under the musty rock.

The black line grew longer, larger, darker. Once we broke it, I sighed with relief. The thick foliage under our feet and the heavy tree-crowns above our heads whispered encouragement. Jozko didn't have to search for the Jews. He knew the exact place. We smelled burning wood.

He crouched down. "Look," he said. "See them."

We lowered ourselves to this level. Before my eyes a scene from Schiller's THE ROBBERS I had seen years ago on the stage in Lvov, revealed itself. On the grass in a small clearing a group of ragmen and ragwomen, their faces reflecting the red and orange of the fire, chatted in low voices. Some were eating, scraping their bowls, some lay spread on the grass, and some stared into the fire which belched circles of smoke into multilevel spirals.

In our flabbergasted condition we did not notice that Jozko had disappeared without a "good-bye" and without receiving a "thank you." In order not to scare the forest dwellers we announced our arrival with the Hebrew greeting "Shalom." They all rose like on command and showered us with questions. They asked for news. We told them about the posse. They knew about the second camp "action". A few of them were escapees thanks to Morland's warning.

"I talked to your Mother," one of the men told us. "She said she tried to go to a house of a Gentile but nobody answered the door so she decided to stay in the camp overnight and try again the next day."

It didn't make it easier for me and my brother. We were no exception. Not one in the group had an intact family.

Having spent most of my young years away from home, I hardly knew the people I was meeting now. But it did not matter. We shared the same misery -- being tramps. There had always been privileged persons, in the city, in the ghetto, even in the camp. But not in the woods. Here we all became beggars and thieves. We stole from the fields and begged from the Gentiles. Even receiving food from those who kept our belongings in storage was considered begging by both sides, the giver and the receiver. The donor -- because he did not expect to have to return the goods, the Jew -- because he did not have the right to claim ownership.

The name Maliniak was derived from the Polish word, *malina*, raspberry, but the berries had already been picked clean. The warden was friendly and helpful. He sold and sometimes gave away food to the Jews. He lived in the center of the forest and allowed the Jews to use his water pump.

While watching the last sparks of fire turn into ashes, we learned some details of forest life. A few more groups of Jews roamed the Maliniak. Nobody stayed long in one place because trampled grass was the most dangerous traitor. Some groups conducted their activities daytime and some at night. Ours was a night camp. They believed that the fire was more visible in daylight. They also feared that the noise no matter how slight, of their movements, might attract unwanted visitors. Next to safety, hunger was the biggest problem. Trips to the city and villages were quite common.

We talked late into the night. When day broke, everybody went to sleep but I, though deadly tired, could not relax under the brightly shining sun. Even in the shade, daylight kept me awake. By the time my eyelids felt sticky enough to stay glued to the eyeballs, the sun was burning the west side of the sky. Soon my friends were ready for their nightly life. When I woke up, supper was served. The gang shared their soup with me and Milo and we shared with them our bread. But we had to get more food and we didn't have any money. The group lived as a commune but everybody felt an obligation to pinch in with food and labor. We listened to the experiences of the others. Some of them had lived in the woods for a long time, even through the winter. They ventured out only at night with different results. Some Gentiles gave willingly, some only for payments, and some threatened with denunciation. This last problem never materialized because Jewish beggars knocked only at isolated houses. No peasant would run in the middle of the night to the distant police office.

Mother had placed many of our household objects, clothing, and merchandise left over from the store, in different Gentile homes for safeguarding. We figured that the least dangerous house to visit would be that of the Zabawczuk family who lived on the eastern outskirts of the city. But we had to wait for a dark night.

The next day I still could not sleep. Whichever way I turned I saw bright light, blue sky, white clouds, the golden sun. Birds circling above made clacking sounds. Those in the trees were singing. The wide blue expanse above my head and the vast green areas around me did not excite me. I did not see the beauty of nature. Not being able to sleep, I tried to study the trees, the grasses, the leaves, the birds, but I didn't remember anything from my school years. I had lost my memory. All I could think of was survival. My teachers used to send my "green book," samples of the flora of the region, to other classrooms as an example, and now in my ignorance I couldn't name the tree under which my head rested. When a human being is dropped to the lowest rung of life by outside forces, he becomes what his enemy wants him to be, an animal.

On a moonless night, Milo and I left for Zabawczuk's. He was a cobbler who had never paid all his bills to our store. As typical city people, we were hardly acquainted with fields and forests. When we were small, Mother would take us to the nearest meadow on Saturday afternoon and that was all we saw of the outer world. We looked now at each other contemplating the question right, left or as the crow flies. We arrived at the gravel highway which led into the city but we stayed away from the road. After squirming and zigzagging for about a kilometer, we reached some prickly clumps of withering bushes.

It was well after midnight when we reached the house. Milo knocked at the window. It took a while before the door was opened. In the darkness the man's face glistened with whiteness. He shook and trembled as if he had met the devil himself.

"What are you doing here? We all could be killed just for talking to you." His teeth clattered with fear.

"Don't be such a coward," said Milo who knew the man better than I. "Other Christians help Jews and nobody shivers like you. Just make it fast. Just give us our shoes, clothes, and some food and we'll go."

Zabawczuk closed the door behind us mumbling incoherently, "I hope, I wish, I hope ... that ... nobody saw you. Shoes, clothes, ... I don't know."

His wife lit a candle, opened a trunk and began throwing things out in a hurry. Some of the stuff was not ours but probably Jewish. We found a pair of pants of our father and his boots. We also took two shirts and a sweater though they were not ours. The woman cut off a nice piece of bread from a large loaf and put some groats into a little sack. We appreciated very much the home-made soap. She didn't seem to be scared. I wanted my winter coat which she could not find and I asked her to have it ready when we come next time. She didn't like the idea about a repeated visit but she promised to find the coat.

"How about some salt and matches?" I seemed to be asking for the moon. Those were store-bought articles. "Sell some of our leather skins." I suspected they had sold them already.

Mrs. Zabawczuk scratched her head but gave me a half-filled box of matches and some salt. Before we left we had to have long gulps of water which was in short supply in the forest. We could use the pump only when there was a special sign in the watchman's window.

The city suburb, submerged in its complacent sleep, seemed dangerously silent. We could hear our own footsteps. I had hoped the return route would shrink, that we'd be able to find places to cut across. But, tired, I walked slower than before, and was more frightened. Any slightest noise, a hare jumping in the grass, a bird swishing its wings, everything was a reason to petrify me.

With all the goodies we brought from the city, we became true partners of the forest commune. The self-appointed leader, Hershele, an elderly shrunken from age man, held daily exercises with his people to train them in underground life. His name was Hersh. The endearing suffix "ele" was usually given by parents to their children and by the Jewish population at large to the most respectable adults or, as a joke, to the most reputable outlaws like Hershele, the Thief.

CHAPTER 28

'General' Hershele tramped furiously around the small forest clearing. He eyed his soldiers with a measured look and stopped in front of me. "Imagine! A whole week of training! And what have you learned? Exactly nothing. Still as green as that grass under your feet." The words came hissing from his sunken mouth; he didn't have enough teeth to eat properly, but too many to speak without a hiss.

After having been cooped up in the attic and in the cave, it was not easy for me to be a trainee of Hershele, the King of Thieves.

Here was Hershele the *Ganev*, the Pick-Pocket, known to everybody in our small city as the notorious Jewish outcast, now giving orders to middle class Jews who were raised with rules of morality and decency. As far as I knew, no member of our group had a criminal record. We all had slept in beds with fresh smelling sheets, and smiled happily in the morning at living mothers and fathers.

Hershele the *Ganev* was different. He had to keep moving from place to place in order to stay one step ahead of the police. His mother became a well-established beggar after her husband left her. She had her steady route. During her six workdays she visited every Jewish home in town; on the seventh day she rested. Hershele was willing to support her but she refused his help.

"What? I should live on stolen money? Never," was her persistent reply to suggestions of early retirement. "I have my profession and I'm making an honest living. I have a clear conscience and I don't want to give it up. I wish I could be as proud of my son as I am of myself."

Now Hershele was teaching us -- not how to achieve pride, but survival. I wondered how much pride he took in the suffix 'ele' of his name.

"Crawl!" came a command. We went down on our knees and elbows.

"You, turtle," he poked my back with his staff which he carried like a rifle. "At your pace where do you think you'll get? When you go on a job you have only a few short night hours to go and come back, so move! And I didn't say creep, I said crawl. Remember, a thief must be as swift as the wind and as mum as a bat."

A soft five-footer with a plumpish anatomy and sluggish energy, I was never agile enough for para-military exercises. I was an old-fashioned bench warmer. All the lessons in algebra, Greek tragedies and world history did not provide me with an once of endurance in case of a physical emergency. How was I supposed to become a swift turtle?

I was facing a new mentor, a man experienced in running from danger. I got off the ground. "Hershele, you know ... I can't ...Anyway, I'll never be a thief. I could not do it."

He gave me a piercing look, then began examining all the others, one by one. Two teen-agers, tall, skinny Marek and short Abe winced under his scrutinizing eyes. But two sisters, Ruma and Sala, set comfortably on the grass. Sala was only an onlooker having just recovered from typhoid fever. While she was ill, Hershele made her a pad of branches and leaves, and did not allow anyone to go near her, not even her own sister.

"I don't want anybody to catch typhus," he warned.

"And what about you?" someone asked.

"Maybe I'm made of stone," he snarled back. "Besides. I'm old. I don't have to care."

Every morning during Sala's illness Hershele brought her a small bottle of milk. Nobody knew if he bought it, stole it, or begged for it.

There was middle-aged Nissan who never went on any foraging trips because he wouldn't break God's commandant 'Thou shall not steal.' Hershele respected the man's Hassidic earlocks. There was blond, blue-eyed Lonek who could have passed for a Gentile had he been born a girl. There were the optimists who believed the war would end soon and there were the pessimists who predicted we were doomed. Hershele also trained the old and the children though he never sent them on trips.

"They should be ready in case of an emergency," he would say.

The group waited for the 'General's' orders. He seemed to be satisfied with the inspection. In the eyes of his subordinates he read respect, something he had never had, something that was always beyond his reach. I wondered whether he tried to repent for his sins or appease his own ego. I settled for what I saw -- he helped Jews to help themselves.

With his eyebrows raised and forehead wrinkled he turned toward me. On top of his otherwise bold head squatted a tuft of hair in the shape and color of a mouse.

When he was angry, the mouse and the eyebrows almost touched each other. So did his pointed nose and his thin lips.

"Yes. I know. You told me already. That you can't do it. That you can't be a thief. That you can't be a soldier." He stamped the ground with his foot. "But that's the only way to survive. And for that you have to fight. Possible or impossible. Moral and immoral. Honest or dishonest. Do the Nazis kill Jews the legal way, the honest way?" 'He's trying to make us into his own image' came to my mind.

"Yet, if you want to starve yourself," he continued, "you're welcome to do so."

For the rest of the day I rolled myself into a ball and stretched into a reed. I climbed a maple tree and waddled among thick, long grasses. Thirst burned my throat, and hunger gripped my stomach.

The sun was casting late rays over the cluster of white-trunked birches that stood like guards in a sea of young elms barely tall enough to hide a man, but gnarled enough to cover any sign of life.

A loud chirp brought the members of the group into a smaller clearing and around a steaming pail of soup. Hershele did not stop lecturing.

"Don't forget. When you're lost in the forest, you chirp like a bird. Let's hear it, turtle."

"Like this," I said and spouted out a whistle.

Hershele's mouse and eyebrows met. "You don't pucker your lips like for a kiss, and you don't whistle when you need help."

Hershele gave my brother Milo and Abe two shovels and two sacks and told them not to leave until it was completely dark. In the meantime they were supposed to rest.

I could not let the boys go alone. I owed it to the memory of my parents to take care of my baby brother. I surprised them in the bushes.

"Sh ... "I whispered. "I'm going with you."

"Where did you get a sack?" asked Milo.

"I stole it," I answered.

"You stole from Hershele, the King of Thieves?" marveled Abe. "But you don't have a shovel."

"You need somebody to fill the sacks. And when you load, I will dig."

I was glad they did not ask why I was going along. Deep in my heart I knew I wanted to show that I was not a turtle, that I was a useful member of the forest community. I was not sure of myself. Did I join the boys in order to watch over my brother or did I have my ego in mind?

Guided by the stars, we elbowed our way between trees and bushes. The low hanging branches tore our clothes and scratched our faces. Overhead the baby-faced moon and the twinkling stars dangled from their plush background, but for us there was only the messy path under our feet. The sounds of the woods frightened me. The dry twigs snapped and moaned, and the dry leaves crackled and rasped on the ground. Where the leaves were wet, I slipped and fell a couple of times. The stillness, the expanse of the open fields shocked me. But when I remembered that only Jews dared to venture into the night in violation of martial law, I trudged along.

Finally we found a place that was suitable for plundering. Far enough from our camp so as not to raise suspicion. I tried digging. Every time my shovel cut into the ground, I felt a knife cutting into by back. I filled the sacks. We devastated a potato plot, ravaged a carrot crop, demolished a cabbage field, and depleted some sugar beet beds. Then we twisted the tops of our sacks and hoisted them onto our shoulders. I could hardly drag my feet. While I was loading, I didn't think of the weight and now the time came. I lifted one foot, then the other. I had to do it. I had chosen to go.

After a few steps I became afraid I'd collapse. But I didn't. I couldn't afford it. I was carrying a life-saving load. For a while I considered leaving part of the vegetables beside the road, maybe behind a tree, and coming back for it the next night. But what if somebody found it -

- right on the way from the ruined field to the forest? We could not leave our label here.

I plodded along, always the last in the convoy. Every few minutes the boys stopped, waiting for me. Little by little I began getting used to the weight. Only my feet, immobile for a few weeks, were hurting.

By the time we reached the forest, the pack on my shoulder didn't seem very heavy. I was proud I had overcome the first hurdle in learning the life of an underground forest dweller. I was anxious to get 'home' to the safety of our domain, the forest. The sky in the east had a pinkish shade already. I couldn't wait to impress the 'general' with my loot. The minute we put down our loads and stretched ourselves on the grass, Hershele was beside us.

"Turtle, why? Why did you go? Why did you do this to us?" He looked down at the sacks on the ground. He didn't hiss. He sizzled. "Where did you get a sack?"

I had planned to tease him, to giggle, to tell him I had stolen it from the King of Thieves. But the mouse on his head was closer to his eyebrows than I had ever seen it before, and his lips were as tight as a rope under his hooked nose.

I pointed toward a bush. "I took it from a pile under those branches." He grabbed his head with his hands.

"Turtle, turtle, what have you done? You've given us away. There was a hole in the bottom." Now I knew why my load kept feeling lighter and lighter.

Hershele lamented. "I don't keep good sacks in the open. Those are the ones to be repaired." Suddenly the folds disappeared from his forehead. In a cool business-tone he added, "Let's wake the gang. We're moving."

Milo looked at the sky. "Now? It's almost daylight."

"You'd rather sit here and wait till they come and get you?" Hershele fired back.

In a moment I was surrounded by angry faces full of resentment.

"Don't look at her as if you want to kill her. As if she did it on purpose," boomed Hershele. "Get moving! Get ready! And keep quiet. We had to move anyway. The grass is worn out. The path to our camp is too visible."

It was not true. We could have stayed if not for my stubbornness and stupidity.

Five minutes later sacks and bundles were tied and the colony was ready to march.

I remained sitting on the grass.

Hershele poked me in the back with his staff. "Hey, you turtle! Take my cane."

CHAPTER 29

We trampled and trotted, stalked and marched in search for a suitable camping place. The part of the forest we settled in was covered with low hazelnut trees -- without the nuts -- almost as thick as bushes but tall enough to hide us. It was a young forest, not thinned out as yet. Here and there stood an old oak or a beech watching like a sentinel over the shorter plants. By that time I had learned already to recognize some of the trees.

We cooked at night but had to collect wood for the fire during daylight. That's what Milo and I were doing the next morning when we heard rustling among the bushes. We stopped dead in our search. We noticed a human figure in rags crouching between the trees. Another hungry Jew? Milo chirped the Jewish watchword. All the groups in the forest used it. The crawling figure did not respond but Hershele showed up, thinking we're lost. The mysterious creature was Megus Rothstein, a distant relative of ours whom Yankel Perlmutter had saved during the last ghetto "action" by providing him with a jacket that bore a yellow patch of the camp inmate. Hershele explained to us that Megus had gone crazy. He had stayed with Perlmutter's group but would not leave the forest to look for food as others did. He was always scared. Scared to visit Gentile acquaintances, scared to beg from farmers, scared to steal from the fields. He constantly repeated, "They'll kill me. They're after me." He refused the food offered by his friends because, as he insisted, "it was stolen."

"It's a sin to steal," he would stay.

Perlmutter tried to convince him that death from starvation was more difficult than from a bullet but Megus could not comprehend it. He was too far gone. We dragged him over to the camp and poured water into his mouth. Bread he would not swallow. At midnight we wanted to feed him hot soup, but he had disappeared. Two days later the forester found his body on the main road that divided the woods into two parts, the Maliniak and the Hory. He had been killed by a bullet. The warden assumed one of the rare hunters was passing that way. It should have been considered an act of compassion. Maybe the hunter was also scared. With his long beard, sunken cheeks and glassy eyes Megus had looked more like a monster than a human being.

Megus had been a handsome young man. Although from a poor home he had never dirtied his hands with hard work. He didn't have to. Orphaned at an early age, he was raised by a bachelor uncle who cushioned his life with tenderness. Uncle Sam was a cocky, uneducated roughneck not welcome in certain circles. He wanted his nephew to be the opposite of himself. Megus grew into a serious, bright, polite, self-educated man but of a weak character. He always leaned on his uncle and later on his wife. The uncle didn't get married until Megus was grown-up and helped in the candy store which Sam opened with money sent by his brothers from America. When left alone after the last ghetto "action," Megus began falling apart.

Besides family relationship, the two men had one thing in common -- they both married out of love and not for money as most Jewish men did in those days. There was no future for a Jewish couple without a dowry.

Before the war Jewish boys and girls did not marry. They were married off by their parents. The old custom of matchmaking had survived into the twentieth century. Husbands had to be bought. The dowry, not the girl, had to fit the value of the groom. A large dowry could conceal a crooked nose, two crossed eyes, a hump on the back or a brainless head. A young man from a good family was priceless. He could draw a high price but not necessarily a priceless girl. No girl was priceless. Only a male medical doctor was.

Hunger was our constant companion. The shortage of water and soap was just as painful. The soap we brought from the city went into the communal bank, and Hershele was tight-fisted. Once a week we're allowed to wash our hands with soap in short spurts. The "general" was watching. Water had to be rationed not only because the pump was far from our camp but also because we could not use it if the warden had house guests.

My brother acclimatized himself to the forest life much faster than I. He was handy and worked for two, for himself and for me. I felt sorry for him and tried to convince him not to volunteer so often for extra work.

"Don't forget that others subsidize the camp with cash," he said, "which we don't have."

I didn't know whether he endured hunger pains easier than I but he made believe he did and often managed to force his last bite into my mouth.

As a compensation, some members of the group liked to talk about food. Questions like "Does anyone remember how a cup of hot cocoa and a fresh roll taste? How they smell?" circulated often. Milo tried to avert my attention from the palate to the scenery, like a birds' nest in a tree or a squirrel hiding in the bush, but he did not mind reminiscing about hygiene, especially a bathtub and a toothbrush.

Plagued by hunger, we resolved to see the Zabawczuks again. We were received in a much friendlier way. They had heard in the meantime stories about other "wandering Jews." Hostile forces had notified the *Schupo* about Jews living in the forests but the police were not anxious to pursue the case. They had not received orders from the *Gestapo*.

We washed our hands and drank a lot of water. The return trip seemed long. We carried quite a load, potatoes, beans, peas, groats, bread, and more clothes, including my winter coat minus the mink collar. Just as last time we were happy to see the dark line of the woods on the horizon. But we could not find the path to our camp. Neither could we find our marker, the bent twig.

As usual, I was tired. "We should wait till daylight," I suggested.

But we kept walking. We walked and chirped, chirped and walked. Until somebody chirped back.

"We're coming," Milo called out.

"Who are you?" a surprised voice asked.

It dawned on us that we entered a different camp.

"I'm Milo Rothstein with my sister Lusia," my brother announced.

A moment later a young boy, about Milo's age, stood in front of us. "How did you find us?" he asked.

"Find? My startled brother said. "We're lost. We're with Hershele."

"Hershele is in the Maliniak, and this is the Hory. And I thought you're looking for Hayka."

"Who's Hayka?" I asked. I guessed the answer. I didn't know Milo had a girl friend. During the German occupation he hardly left the house.

The boy, Ahzik Birnbaum, let us into a clearing where we met the so-call Sass group (no relationship to Dr. Sass). It was a kind of a two-family affair between the Sasses and the Epsteins. These people were not emaciated and not as ragged as Hershele's group. Their clothes were not in tatters but covered with colorful patches. Mama Sass with her four sons and two daughters formed the pillar of the camp. Itche Epstein who had two younger sisters, eighteen-year-old Bronna and eight-year-old Ruhele, seemed to be a business partner. David Landsman and his sister Debora were early forest dwellers. They had provided the first instructions on forest life to both families. I never learned how Ahzik joined the group. It was a big difference between this camp and Hershele's. Here members had been selected while Hershele's band consisted mostly of single persons, a mix and no-match group.

While Milo was getting re-acquainted with Hayka, I did not fail to notice that Mama Sass had signaled her eldest son Motek who in turn had winked at Itche. The three held a short conference on the side and Motek announced that we may stay with them if we wanted. If we wanted? How gratefully we accepted the offer.

The sky in the east began to lighten. This was a day camp; they slept at night. They believed that smoke could be detected at night easier than daytime. The camp seemed to be well organized. At the edge of the clearing, leaning against a broad trunk of an oak tree stood a low tent made of branches and twigs with the wilted leaves still on. Higher up in a fork of a tree sat a packet tightly wrapped in canvas. It was, as I soon found out, the most valuable possession, food. A few pails of water covered with cloth stood among the bushes. Even a toilet had been dug, -- not too far for the people to get lost but not too close for obvious reasons.

I fell asleep. Preparations for breakfast woke me up. I joined the girls for kitchen duty. We sat around a pail partially filled with water, peeled potatoes checking them for the slightest blemished, washed them, cut them into small pieces and placed them into another pail that was hanging above a hunter type stove. The fire had to be watched constantly. For safety reasons it could not climb very high but for practical reasons it had to flicker and hiss for a very long time until the potatoes and grits were fully cooked. The soup that often contained onions, carrots, cabbage or anything that was available, always tasted heavenly. This meal was served twice a day, usually with a slice of bread. There was little rest between the meals. After the dishes had been washed we were already preparing the next pail of soup.

Mama Sass, an unpretentious elderly woman, had lost her husband in the ghetto to typhoid fever. She didn't demand respect but she bathed in it. She received it not only from her children but also from everybody else. She ruled over the camp without realizing that she was the boss. She did not issue orders like Hershele yet no move was undertaken without her consent. She had to approve every excursion, every field raid and every trip out of the borders of the forest.

Four brothers named Krupa lived in four separate houses at the foot of the hills where Hory was located. (Hory means in Ukrainian hills or mountains). Three of them sold food to the Jews and sometimes gave it away for free but the fourth, the only rich one, would not open the door for a Jew. His excuse was not hate for the Jews but fear of the Germans. The warden of the Hory, Miesiac, was tolerant and helpful and often brought us news about village gossips. To discourage the farmers from entering the forest, the Sass group had concocted a plan which had later backfired. Miesiac was dropping hints among the peasants that the Jews who lived in the forest owned arms. He also confirmed the beliefs of the superstitious farmers that the Jewish ghosts, unhappy with the mass graves, were prowling the forest in search of better burial places. For the first few months a Gentile hardly entered the woods.

Nehama, Hayka's older sister, was the administrator and the head cook. Though only twenty-years-old, she was hardened and supple at the same time; a true child of the ghetto. With a full figure, soft curves and a clever spark in her dark eyes, she had a warm word for everybody. Her younger sister, Hayka, was a dumpling with rosy cheeks and pale skin. The corners of her mouth jittered with a shy hidden smile which gave her the manner of a gay child. Bronna Epstein also did not look undernourished. With her vivid face and deep-set brown eyes she could have been a good-looking girl -- in normal conditions. But beauty, art, civilization did not exist for the forest people. We only talked and dreamt about food and freedom. I felt sorry for Bronna's little sister. She was skin and bones. She ate very little and was always sad. Although pampered by the adults, she was lonely and didn't hide it. She was missing her parents, her friends, and her childhood. During the long hours of cooking and serving which had to be done in installments due to the shortage of eating utensils, I became familiar with the girls very quickly. Debora Landsman showed the wear and tear of the vagabond life much more than the other girls. No wonder. She and her brother had been roaming the woods since early spring. But they were not pioneers. Some Jews had spent the whole winter 1942-1943 in the forests.

After a few days I noticed that Mama shared her leadership in a very discreet and delicate way with Itche Epstein but her eldest son, Motek, considered himself the head of the camp. He was vain enough to care about his image and Mama was smart enough to allow him this privilege. It gave him clout and didn't harm anyone. Motek had a heart of gold. He would have taken all the Jews from all the forests under his wings and into his camp if Mama and Itche didn't restrain him. She knew her son's shortcomings and she had a quiet way of toning down his aspirations. He was a great talker but not a speaker. His elastic jaw was always munching words. His lips and tongue jumped up and down in such a hurry that it sounded as if he had a full mouth of hot food and tried to shove it from one side to the other. He was impatient and restless and didn't like to stay in one place. He would have enjoyed combing the forest as his fifteen-year-old brother did, often in broad daylight.

Shayko was in most respects more mature than his oldest brother. He did go out into the woods during the quiet summer months but he could afford it. He was a stocky boy with big grey eyes, light brown hair and a short, flat nose. Strolling far from the camp, he dispersed snatches of Ukrainian folk songs in perfect peasant dialect. If met by a Gentile, he would have easily passed for a farm hand. He also trusted his courage and fast thinking which later was a great help in a few tight situations.

David Landsman who also had safe looks but no safe diction, often accompanied Shayko on those escapades. David knew the terrain better than anyone else but Shayko had to restrain him often from taking risks. The young boy must have been born with an intuitive feeling which was very important in our way of life. Most of the time we lived by the hunch.

We had to move every few weeks. When the path to the camp showed wear and tear which meant when the grass became flattened, it was time to change quarters. David and Shayko would go scouting to find a suitable place. Moving had to be done nighttime because it was impossible to do it in perfect silence. A handle of a pail would rattle, dry wood would crackle under the feet. In passing, the leaves on the bushes would whisper. Twigs would snap.

We stopped building tents. They did not provide enough protection from rain and required a great deal of branches and twigs that had to be cut off live trees. Payshe, the second Sass boy, directed the packing. He had a stable disposition and never showed any jealousy when Mama promoted Motek's wisdom. All the Sass children realized that their oldest brother was an eccentric but it never disturbed the solidarity of the family.

The third in seniority Sass boy was retarded. Zalman was the tallest, biggest and strongest of all brothers, timid and not demanding. He was a hard worker, talked very little, stayed close to Mama, and never caused any trouble. Hungry for novelties and for new arrivals, he took to Milo like a bee to a flower and followed him from one end of the clearing to the other and from one tree to the next. If Milo had to go on an expedition, like for food or water, somebody had to distract Zalman. If a visitor from a different Jewish group arrived -- Zalman forgot about Milo until the guest left. Nobody knew how much of the situation the retarded boy understood. He undoubtedly was missing the city, even the ghetto. He was bored with the same people day in and day out.

Itche Epstein was the spiritual and religious leader of the group. He was the exact opposite of Motek who displayed his flamboyance when Itche demonstrated caution. Itche cherished his Hebrew calendar and his prayer book as his greatest possessions. He knew when to conduct the high holiday services in fall and when to bless the new moon. What surprised me in him was his pessimism. I though that hope went hand-in-hand with faith and the knowledge of the Bible.

"What do we know about God's ways?" he would say. "Maybe He's probing us. Teaching us a lesson. Maybe we're born to suffer."

I didn't think he was ready to surrender his life but maybe he wouldn't have tried so hard if he hadn't been mother and father to his two younger sisters. Although physical survival is the strongest animal instinct in the human body, the powerful demon, Hitlerism, had broken many a tough soul. Worn out physically and mentally, many a Jew turned himself in after having lost the whole family.

"The Nazis won't give up," Itche would say. "They're set on killing all the Jews."

I argued that the Germans were losing the war. They were running backwards.

"That's what I'm afraid of," he answered. "Their retreat. They'll try to kill every Jew before they leave."

He proved to be a true prophet. While withdrawing, the German soldiers rummaged through farmhouses and killed every hidden Jew they found.

I felt in the same situation as Itche Epstein. Milo was ten years younger than I. I had to keep hope alive. On the fifth of August he turned twenty. I told him about an experience I had on my tenth birthday when he was only ten days old. A hailstorm had covered our flower garden with pellets of ice. I cried when I saw snatches of my beloved petunias peeping out from between the hailstones. I couldn't understand why the flowers that smiled so nicely with their open little mouths only a few minutes earlier, lay smashed by the weight of ice, strewn over the garden by blasts of wind.

"You might not believe me," I said, "but many of them came back to life when the sun warmed them up."

"I'm twenty not ten" answered Milo.

My birthday story was a flop. Ten days later I turned thirty. Milo didn't have a birthday story for me.

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CHAPTER 30

The days were shorter and cooler, the sun's rays were hitting lower, and the trees were losing their leaves. The prospect of being exposed by the naked forest was alarming. Through the web of dry branches the vast dark sky seemed more threatening than ever before. David and Shayko began a campaign of searching for a dense part of the forest and after a few days they found something that seemed to be untouched by human foot since the saplings had been planted into the ground. The branches were thin but so intertwined that they formed a thicket. David who was considered the agriculturist among us, declared that these trees would be due for pruning in the spring. The twisted twigs shredded our clothes but our lives were more important.

The woods were quiet. There had not been a disturbance since Megus was killed. We decided to visit the Podhorzer group in Maliniak. They had survived the previous winter in a bunker that Podhorzer, a son-in law of a rabbi and a bookkeeper by profession, had built. He had constructed many hideouts in the ghetto before he left for the woods with his wife. We thought it be good to meet other Jews and take a lesson how to dig a well concealed bunker for the winter. I was the only female on the trip. I insisted on being included because Milo was one of the participants. The march was uneventful until we came within an earshot -- literally -- of the place we're aiming for. A gun shot was heard. We scattered. Everyone grabbed a tree trunk. We stood like that for a long time, each of us pasted with the back to the bark of a tree. After a long wait Shayko, our spy, climbed his tree. Not seeing anything suspicious, he slithered away on his hands and knees. A few minutes later he came back with a man from the Podhorzer group.

"A civilian who looked like a peasant," the man said, "and a German policeman went straight toward the bunker. The German fired one shot into the opening. They turned around and left. The farmer knew the location of the bunker and that's it. Mrs. Podhorzer was killed instantly. She was alone. Her husband was somewhere outside."

That put a scare on all the Jews in the Maliniak. They decided to move. We returned to our little clearing in the

Hory. We never saw the wonderful bunker with the built in stove and chimney.

According to Yanek Miesiac, the warden's son, in fall more and more farmers complained to the Germans about Jews plundering the crops in the fields. The police were unwilling to enter the forest unless they were shown the exact place, and one farmer did it in the Podhorzer case. After that incident we stayed as quiet as field mice. For about two weeks we ate half rations and used half of the water we normally consumed. Washing, either bodies or clothes, was out of the question. It was remarkable how much easier we withstood the filth and lice that began to show up, than hunger. Soon our bowels growled so loud that we had to renew our food forages. Our lives, or rather our existence, returned to normal. During the fall and winter Milo and I went a few more times to Zabawczuk. With the help of his wife who was courageous and more generous than he, we trained him to accept our infrequent visits. We never left their house empty-handed.

David who considered himself an all-knowing nature man, suggested we change our summer password, the chirp, to a winter tune. Just thinking about snowstorms was enough for me to get the shivers. Angles of birds overhead flying south made us realize that winter was coming. But none of us was acquainted with voices of winter birds. Not even

David who pretended to know everything about country life, had any suggestions. Sometimes he tried to predict the weather on the basis of the position of the moon but he was always wrong.

"What about a raven?" asked little Ruhele.

"Does a raven have a voice?" followed up Nehama.

"Yes. It sounds like a call to a funeral," said Milo.

"According to superstition, the sight and the voice of a raven bring bad luck," I said.

"How about imitating an owl?" someone asked.

"Or a wild duck?"

I had a hard enough time to learn how to chirp. I didn't want to hoot like an owl or quack like a duck. "We don't have ducks here," I said. "Not in the summer and not in the winter. Ducks need water. We don't have owls. They usually live in abandoned buildings. Anyway, we all know that our imitations are only for us. They would not fool an enemy. They are like Aryan papers. Good as long as not tested. Leave it the way it is. It's a password, not a safety guard." My opinion was accepted.

The main problem now was where and how to dig the dungeon for winter. We chose a place not far from the clearing we have been occupying in the thicket. It was a little open space among older and taller trees. With so many young healthy hands we needed more shovels if we planned to have an underground home before the arrival of winter. The great optimists, Motek, David, and Shayko used their well known expression, 'Not to worry.' They were right. I don't know how they did it but we got plenty of shovels. As usual, Motek took credit for the organization, preparations and building of the bunker.

Nothing would have been done without outside help, from Gentiles. I was puzzled. With all the anti-Semitism that prevailed before and during the war, what happened that the Gentiles were willing to help the Jews in the forest? Did they have a change of heart? Did they get tired of seeing so much Jewish blood? Had the pendulum swayed in the right direction? If so, why? There can't be a change in behavior without a previously altered attitude. Easy going Motek ascribed the "good fortune" to his previous business relations with many Christians. Clear thinking Payshe attributed the tolerance to the high prices the forest Jews paid the warden and the peasants for the food. But we knew that some gentiles gave away small amounts of provisions for free. It only proved how impenetrable human minds and characters are. The fact was that no Jew would have survived in the woods without outside help.

The excavation of our winter residence was going well. In the meantime the resourceful Sass-Epstein company managed to acquire a load of potatoes. Two courageous peasants drove into the forest in a horse-drawn farm wagon filled to the brim with that staple of our nourishment. The hole in the ground had already been prepared. The sacks were quickly emptied and the potatoes were covered with the freshly dug up soil. That's how farmers in the villages readied themselves for the winter.

I was sure the strangers would be impatient to leave as soon as possible. I was wrong. They stayed and chatted. They did not know how far the front line was but one thing was sure, the Germans were losing the war. How much longer would it take? Nobody could foresee. They talked like Motek -- not to worry.

"The forest Jews will survive," one of the men said.

"The *Schupo* are not interested in you. 'The Jews will die slowly in the woods,' they say."

Our bunker was getting deeper by the day. The top soil was soft, black and lightweight as most of the fertile land in that part of the country, but the lower layers consisted of pure hard clay. It did not present an obstacle to our boys. It hardly slowed them down. And we girls kept the fires going to feed the workers.

One late afternoon when we all sat around the hot pail of soup wandering where Shayko was, he came running from the direction of the nearly finished bunker. He was out of breath.

"I ... just ... kill ... killed a fox," he blurted out.

"What?" cried out David. His face turned pale. "Why? Why did you do that?"

"I ... I couldn't help it." He stammered. He sat down and rested. "Wait a second. I'll tell you."

"So what?" said Motek. "Big deal. Killed a fox. There're plenty foxes around."

David shook with anger. "It's a very big deal. We're in trouble with Miesiac. God knows what he'll do to us. He might chase us out."

Motek still tried to laugh it off but stopped when he noticed that nobody supported him.

"I was down there," Shayko began, "when the fox jumped in. He grabbed me by the pants." He showed us the tear. "I was lucky he didn't bite into the flesh. I was scared. I didn't know what to do. I had the shovel in my hand and I hit him."

What did city people know about foxes in the forests?

Most of us asked, "Why does Miesiac have to know?"

This time David was right. "A warden knows everything about his foxes. He knows all their holes and if a fox is missing, he tracks it."

"What's done is done," said the practical Payshe. "We can't change it. We have to cover up the tracks. Let's dig a hole and bury it."

"Bury an animal?" Ahzyk protested. "When's the last time we saw meat? Let's cook it and eat it."

Everybody thought it was a wonderful idea. Plans were made for next day's feast. Thinking of tomorrow, I was already smelling the aroma and relishing the delicacy of the tender meat. The boys brought up the little dead beast from the bunker. Its head had been clobbered but the rest of the body was intact. It was decided to bake the animal on a bar over open fire the way hunters do, but nobody volunteered to prepare the victim for the ceremony. Lots were drawn. Milo had to cut off the head with a shovel; we did not have an ax. He squinted his eyes and wrinkled his nose but he did it. David skinned the fox, Motek slit the body open, and Ahzyk cleaned out the insides.

As soon as the sky lightened in the east, the girls started the fire. The boys wrapped the animal around the metal bar on which the soup pail usually hung. Hours passed. We watched and watched. We fed the fire and turned the meat. Belly up, belly down, until it was as dark as coal and as hard as a stone. At sunset we came to the conclusion that fox meat was not edible. It was at its softest stage when it was raw. We buried the corpse far from our settlement and walked in a funeral procession to and from the grave. Instead of roast we had a slice of bread for supper. It was too late to cook soup.

The next morning Yanek Miesiac thundered. David was right. Nobody could fool a warden. There was no use denying. It took a great number of words, maybe also cash, I didn't know, to persuade the father and son that the killing was unavoidable, that it was not done on purpose. And the forester continued to support us to the very end.

CHAPTER 31

According to Yanek, crop-stealing plagued the farmers before the war also. Poor people always needed food and professional thieves always had to make a living. Thus, all the thefts should not have been blamed on the Jews. Yet resentment among the Gentile population grew. Yanek fed us alarming stories about Jews with guns robbing homes of known anti-Semites in the Ostapie and Ostra Mogila region, and about farmers' retaliations. These places were far from us but it was no consolation. We remembered that Miesiac was asked to spread a fable about our guns though we didn't have any.

All the while the work on the bunker was progressing nicely. Besides shovels, we needed buckets and ropes. Thanks to the Sass-Epstein ingenuity, energy, wisdom, and probably money, everything was located. The entrance to the dungeon was small. Only one person could go up or down the ladder at one time. The boys working below were digging and filling the pails with clay. Those on the ground pulled the buckets up on ropes.

Furnishing the place was the next miracle. Every positive thing that happened to us was considered a miracle. Besides the ladder the inside was equipped with a tiny kerosene lamp. Most of the floor was covered with straw which was brought into the forest in tightly closed sacks. The smallest stalk found by a stranger would have betrayed us. We had talked about acquiring straw many times before but feared the risk. Now the girls patched those few bags that were made of heavier weave than others and the boys marching in single file, brought them filled with straw from the forester's barn. The last boy in the line did not carry straw. He picked every stalk and piece that had fallen to the ground.

The first night in the dugout, sleeping on straw instead of the bare ground, without the cold wind blowing over my body, gave my soul a lift. In the morning I heard the same opinion from other members of the group. If the war dragged out into the winter, we had a chance to survive.

The entrance to the bunker was partially covered with two small boards leaving openings for fresh air circulation. We had to prevent another fox tragedy.

Autumn passed quietly. We had no trouble from the outside world. There was not much left in the fields. The sugar beets stayed in the ground longer than any other vegetable. They were very hard and had to be boiled for hours and hours. Most of the time we just sucked the sugar out of raw beets.

When the weather was nice, we stayed outside as long as possible sitting around the fire. On one clear starry night with the full moon hanging over our head, we heard some movement between the trees. We extinguished the fire. We knew those weren't Germans; they'd come daytime. And it was not the noise of a jumping squirrel or scratching field mouse. Heavy pounding steps were approaching. The low branches crackled with warnings. The crushed foliage whispered about danger. Two men like two shadows sprang from the thicket. With my inclination toward exaggeration, I was looking at two giants.

"We are friends," one of them announced in a chunky, guttural voice. "No reason to be scared." He made a step forward.

In the light of the moon I saw a middle-aged, middle-sized rotund man with a blunt nose above a square jaw.

I sat dumbfounded, frightened to the core. I read the same expression in all the other faces.

"I'm Wyszkowski," the man continued, "and this is my friend, Bencar."

Bencar moved closer. His huge body rested on a pair of powerful legs. With a dull, dangerous smile on his lips he raised a brutish hand to his forehead as if in a military salute.

A moment of terrifying silence followed.

"Don't be afraid of us," said Wyszkowski in much faster manner than he spoke earlier. "We are Poles."

He was in a hurry to spill the word "Poles." It was supposed to be a mitigating point. The Ukrainians were considered the friends of the Germans but it was not always so.

Itche was the first to recover from the shock. "What do you want?" he asked.

"We don't want anything," Wyszkowski answered. "We came to have a friendly chat."

Motek rose to his feet and so did the rest of the boys.

"Fine. Let's chat," said Motek using his firebrand-voice which was effective often in spite of his slight speech impediment. Mama poked him in his leg. She did not approve of his attitude. He bent down to her and after a few seconds of whispering Mama ordered the females to the background. We slid and crept away inconspicuously one by one. But we stayed close enough to listen.

"You have it nice here," said Wyszkowski. "The weather is good."

They came to talk about the weather? I asked myself.

No answer.

"What do you do when it rains?"

"We get wet," said Itche.

After a few seconds of silence the uninvited guest asked, "Do you know who will free you from this forest?"

"God," answered Itche.

"Not your God. The Polish God. We Poles have an underground army not far from here."

It was not only a blatant lie but also a stupid one. A Polish underground amidst Germans and Ukrainians?"

"I wish you luck," said Motek.

A long silence followed.

"Where do you sleep?" Wyszkowski asked.

"Wherever we find soft grass," said Itche.

"Why did the girls disappear?"

Mama Sass rushed us. "Quick, to the bunker." She went with us. She didn't like the last question, she said. I stood on the top rung of the ladder and heard loud voices but could not make out words. After the intruders left, the boys stayed outside a little longer to make sure the hoodlums were gone. When our gang came down, we showered them with questions. "Who are they? What do the want? Are they friendly? Are they a threat?"

David had met Wyszkowski in spring when the Jews had only begun their woodsmen's existence. "He used to be friendly," David said. "Even helpful. He used to advise us to which forest to go, where to find a safer place and where it was easier to find food. But he's different now."

"I'm afraid that the other guy, that Bencar, is dangerous. He doesn't talk. He plays the bodyguard," I said.

"You know that the *Schupo* won't go into the forest unless someone is willing to go ahead and show them the way. Is that what these guys want to do to us?" asked Mrs. Sass.

"No. That's not why they came, said Itche. They are not killers but they are robbers. Remember we asked Miesiac once to tell the villagers that we are armed. Now Wyszkowski wants our guns and money."

"For his Polish army, he says," added David with a bitter smile.

The boys blamed themselves for the visit.

"When I told Miesiac," said Motek, "to spread lies about our non-existing guns, I was sure it will help us. Miesiac agreed with me. And it did help until now. These guys really think that we have guns. They said they will be back. We might be in trouble," Motek could not be scared off easily. "Tomorrow we get out and collect an arsenal of canes, staffs, poles, beams, whatever we find. If they show up, we'll give them a lesson. And we will not tell them we don't have guns. They must think we have them and don't want to give them up."

The two Poles never came back but they tried the same trick on other Jewish groups.

Yanek Miesiac told us about bands of armed Jews in the big forests of Ostapie and Ostra Mogila to the east of us. Wyszkowski must have heard it also. Not until after the war did we learn about the true Jewish bandits, Hershko Birnbaum's group.

Hershko, a poor smith and handyman from a small village near the city of Grzymalów, owned an old gun before the war. During the German occupation he restored it into working condition. When life in the ghetto became unbearable, he prepared a bunker in the forest for himself, his relatives and close friends. A man of many skills, he had a friendly disposition, a sense of humor and ability to mingle with people. He was well liked by the villagers for his wit, sociability, talent for entertaining a crowd, and for his good heart. His enormous physical strength brought him admiration from men and women. Initially his bunker was well equipped with provisions but time came when he was running out of food. Hershko didn't have any difficulties buying food from his Gentile friends, a group of Polish farmers who also served him as spies. Rumors of Jews with cash in their pockets reached the wrong ears. One of Hershko's men was killed and robbed of his money. After he was informed that the murderer was one of the local Ukrainian anti-Semites, Hershko swore revenge. With his revolver and two dummy wooden carbines he and two of his men attacked the isolated house of the killer and left with an additional gun and as much food as they could carry.

When the remnants of the Soviet partisans who so triumphantly had marched through Skalat in July, returned, decimated, from the Karpaty mountains, they stopped to rest at the vast Ostapie, Ostra Mogila and Krecilow forests where they met and formed a short-lived partnership with Hershko's gang. By that time the group had acquired more guns by attacking a few other Jew-haters. Together with the partisans, they owned a sizable arsenal. They invaded a German estate -- like the one where Hefner lived -- on a night when only the servants were around, loaded a wagon with cereals, cheeses, sugar, eggs, and dragged along a live cow which they cooked in the forest. They sent back the wagon and horses without a driver. The partisans, after filling their bellies and taking their share, left for the East and Hersko and his people suffered the consequences. They had to keep on running from place to place. They suffered a few raids from Germans and Ukrainians and lost a few people, but most of them survived.

CHAPTER 32

One week passed, and another, and we began to hope that Wyszkowski and Bencar forgot about us. We conducted endless discussions on the subject but nobody was able to come up with the right answer to the question what to do if they come. Itche, the silent strategist, Motek, the hotshot, the shrewd Peyshe, none of them had a solution. It was just wait and see and be ready to fight.

When the first snow blanketed the woods, our morale dropped a notch. If the trampled brown autumn grass had created a danger to our safety, what could footprints in the white snow do to us? We gathered pails and buckets of the beautiful flakes expecting to get a barrel of water but after melting them we had barely enough to cook a meal. Yet we did not dare to go to the water pump. We washed our bodies with snow in a specially assigned place called the bath house whose only equipment was a board on the ground so the bather would not have to stand barefoot in the snow. We had gotten spoiled during the quiet time when the boys used to bring enough water so that everybody had a good scrubbing once a week. With the colder weather in December we had to wear more layers of clothes which provided the lice with cozy living quarters. They grew, prospered, and multiplied. I took a snow bath every day but it didn't kill the insects.

It stopped snowing and it got colder. On one of these freezing days we heard chirping. Shayko, the best chirper, answered. The visitors were two Jews from Maliniak who suffered from the same malady as we did -- Wyszkowski and Bencar. The Poles had already been to a few Jewish camps and from what we gathered, they were more menacing than in our place. We with seven young men were considered the strongest group in the forest. Most other camps consisted mainly of middle-aged and elderly men, women and children. Bencar had hardly said a word to us but in the other places both Poles threatened, especially the women, cursed, used profanities and called the Jews communists for refusing assistance to the sacred cause of the Polish revolution. David told the two Jews about his previous experience with the two Polish men. He thought them to be adventurers looking for a thrill.

Motek's advice was to talk to them from the point of strength. "Don't show that you're scared. Yell. Talk the same dirty language they talk."

A few days later we had another Jewish visitor, Mayer Gruenfeld, the fabricator of fake Aryan papers in the ghetto. He had made himself a bad name for charging exorbitant prices for his work but in the forest he became an ambassador of goodwill. It took courage to wander alone from one group to another in the woods. He brought money and food. I thought his conscience bothered him but after the war I was told his prices were high because he had big expenses. He had bribed an official in the civil office to get access to old birth certificates and other identification papers. It was not his fault the papers did not work. He did not have the right equipment to make them work. His own wife and two children perished after they were led out from the city by the same man who was supposed to bring me and Gusta Rein to safety. Many of the owners of fake Aryan papers, harassed by paid Gestapo informers in their new residences, returned to the ghetto. Every newcomer in the Aryan world, especially one who did not work or was looking for work, was a suspect. The blackmailed Jew, instead of showing the false document, ran. And when he got tired of running or couldn't find a place to run to, he went back home to the ghetto if it still existed.

Gruenfeld, Mrs. Weissbrod and her son Abraham were hiding in the house of a wealthy Ukrainian farmer who was also a shrewd businessman. As soon as the three Jews found out about the Wyszkowski-Bencar affair, they composed a letter warning the two men not to put to shame the Polish patriots by haunting poor hungry Jews in the forest. "We'd received complaints from the Jewish partisans," the letter stated, "that you harass them." Drawing on his experience with falsifications, Gruenfeld concocted a seal of the Polish government with the white eagle in the center. The letter, signed by fictitious names, was addressed to Wyszkowski. The friendly Ukrainian in whose house the three Jews were hiding, dropped the letter into a mailbox in Tarnopol.

The thugs swallowed the bait. They were not seen in the woods anymore.

The donors of the food and cash Gruenfeld brought to the Jews in the forest preferred to stay incognito at that time. The recipients were informed it came from the Polish committee. The explanation was not taken seriously but the gifts were appreciated. After the war Gruenfeld told the survivors that all of it was donated by the Weissbrods who were well-off before the war.

When Gruenfeld heard that my parents had given Kornel Kuchtiak our silver tableware, silver candlesticks and many other valuable household subjects, he volunteered to go with us to Kuchiak's house. He was sure he knew where the man lived. But he was wrong. We went but could not find the house. We were thankful to him for trying. It was a long and dangerous trip.

If not Wyszkowski, there was always something else. In the Maliniak, Perlmutter's teen-age son was on his way to the pump to fetch water when he was stopped by an armed man, Ziemba, from the village of Horodnica. The farmer sent a message back to the Jews through the boy.

"Tell them that in half an hour I want all your money and gold right here. If I don't get it, I'm bringing the *Schupo*."

At that time an ex-boxer, Schwartz, a refugee from the West, stayed with the Perlmutter group. He went out to take a look at Ziemba, watching him from behind the trees. Schwartz grabbed the man from the back and took away his gun and cap. The gun was a decoy.

One cold morning in December Yanek came running with a message from his father.

"Leave immediately. The Germans are planning a raid on the forest tomorrow."

We packed our miserly possessions into sacks, bags, pails and buckets. Where should we go? Maliniak was almost the same forest. Chmieliska? Too close. After a five minute conference the decision fell on the Okno woods. We left right away. When a Jew had to leave the forest, he always traveled nighttime but Yanek warned us there was no time to lose. The SS or the Schupo or whoever they were might change their plans and come today. We were on our way in minutes. Everyone carried a load. Even little Ruhele had her package. We straggled in a single file. Shayko who could jump like a cat and slither like a snake, led the way. David strutted behind him. Our diplomat, Itche, the pseudo-leader, Motek, closed the rear. Milo carried a sack of potatoes on his back. My load was not heavy but cumbersome. I dragged a pail filled with burlap and other rags we used for patching clothes and wrapping our worn-out shoes. I had a hard time lifting my feet in Father's oversized boots that had doubled in weight with the burlap wrapping.

It was a cold, windy, dry day. The small patch of sunlight that peeked from behind the clouds served us as a compass. Like true criminals -- that's what we were in the eyes of the Nazis -- we plodded with shuffling feet and hunched backs through stubble-covered frozen fields, past groves of trees and clusters of bushes. With weary but attentive ears we listened to every rustle, every crackle, every jingle. Whenever we saw a horse-drawn carriage or a pedestrian on the road, no matter how far from us, we hit the ground. We were not experience marchers. We had to rest. Twice during the day we sat down behind a screen of bushes and shared a drink of water. It began to snow lightly in the afternoon but thanks to a strong wind the flakes did not accumulate under our feet but drifted away toward the ravine that skirted the highway.

About nightfall we reached a wooded area. We were not sure whether it was Ostapie or Okno but it did not matter. The trees were different from those in the Hory. I was used to seeing mostly beech trees, elms and oaks. Here we found many maples, willows and birch trees. Since we planned to stay in that place only two or three days, we decided not to go deep into the forest. We settled under a tall, triple trunked willow whose thin but dense branches hung down almost to the ground. This gave us a slight shelter from the wind. Looking up, I could hardly see the sky through the network of branches. Milo and I and a few others went in different directions to collect wood and stones for a fireplace. Once in a while we chirped to stay in touch. There was plenty of dry wood but a shortage of stones. The boys improvised a field kitchen while the girls peeled potatoes. The fire was watched more carefully than ever before and we kept it going the whole night so as not to freeze to death. The guards changed a few times during the night.

The morning did not bring any relief in the temperature. I slapped my arms against my sides and stamped the frozen soil with my feet as if jumping rope, a thing I did not do when I was a youngster. I never liked to waste time on physical activities and now I reaped the bitter reward. In our group I was the least adapted and the most unsuitable person for existing conditions. With Milo's help I tried to cover up my lingering as well as my suffering and hoped that nobody laughed at me or felt sorry for me. I didn't mind a friendly joke about my awkwardness but I wouldn't have liked an expression of pity.

During the day we kept two small fires going so that everybody could huddle around at the same time. We were always afraid that a larger fire might flare up too high or roar too loud.

After two days and two nights in the strange place, we decided to go back to the Hory. This prompted us to turn into spendthrifts. Instead of carrying the heavy potatoes back, we baked them which was a great luxury. And we enjoyed that dainty rare morsel immensely. Adding water and groats to potatoes provided us with a more rational meal for our life style. Another reason for baking the potatoes was that we had run out of water.

It was a dark night when we began our return trip. Our luggage was smaller. We had gotten rid of the water and potatoes. We did not meet any obstacles. No human soul. No horse drawn buggies. The darkness was still hanging heavily over the trees when we entered the Hory. A stream of warmth shot through my body from the top of my head to my numb toes at the thought of resting my aching bones on the matted straw under the thick earthen roof.

Approaching the bunker, I tripped over a large branch. How did it get there? A fresh, heavy branch would not fall off the tree by itself. People had been there. A few steps farther we found our ladder on the ground. There was no doubt. David and Shayko grabbed two pails and dashed off toward the warden's house. They brought back water and bad news.

Though Yanek had warned all the Jews in the forest about the forthcoming raid, one group of desperadoes, probably elderly and in a state of depression, moved into our bunker and were killed. Villagers were ordered to bury the bodies. It was a terrible blow to the conscience and to the soul of everyone in our group. Maybe the murderers were looking specifically for us and others became the victims. It was a shock but not a surprise. The old, sick, hungry, eaten by lice and bitten by frost could not take anymore and gave up. Some had been spending the second winter on the run in the woods. They took a risk hoping the raiders would miss the bunker. We suspected Wyszkowski and Bencar but we never learned the truth.

The boys said Kaddish, the prayer for the dead, then went down to the bunker and brought up the bloody straw which we burned in the fire that had been ablaze already. Normally we were very careful about the flames but on that night we let them take their course. Gurgling and spurting, the dry twigs roared and howled like an unholy beast. This was the only way of protest we knew. The fountain of tears had dried up long ago but the pain in our hearts made the will for survival even stronger. We were stubborn -- some of us must live to tell the world the whole truth about Hitler's ways of conquest over the weak and building his Third Reich that was supposed to keep his Aryan Germans happy for the next one thousand years.

We spent the rest of the night "upstairs" lying on the frozen ground as we did the two previous nights in the strange forest. I stared at the dark, cold, merciless sky. Why and why and why? I yearned for a reason, an explanation, a hint for an end to our misery. A gust of wind blew from the north. The bare twigs and branches overhead rocked, jolted, bounced back and forth, and returned to their previous positions. But my mind would not be restored to the stage of peace. I could neither sleep nor think. I could only ask the one question, "Why?" Itche probably would have answered, "The cup is not full yet." But I did not ask his opinion.

Our exposed winter palace had to be abandoned. A search began for a suitable location for a new dungeon. There were not many thickets like the one where our present camp was located. A larger clearing was selected; that was what the new "building plan" required. It would not be an underground bunker. It had taken many weeks to build the old one. Now we were in a hurry. It was the middle of the winter. We had to be satisfied with a simple hole in the ground. Actually, it would be nothing but a ravine, that terrible word we were so afraid of. That's how the mass graves were dug. The first ones were prepared by farmers who were told by the Germans that gasoline would be stored in the trenches. All the next graves were dug by the victims themselves. That's why the words ravines and trenches had such bad connotations for us. We hoped we were not digging our own graves.

The frozen ground did not yield easily to the attacks of the pick and shovels. Tangles of roots had to be chopped and cleared and debris had to be hauled away in buckets. We did not have a wheelbarrow at our disposal as during the first experiment. We did not notify the warden about our move; we knew he'd find us. We were still spending nights in the old bunker but we always left at daybreak. We hoped to stay in secrecy as long as possible but Yanek discovered us before the place was finished. It was a long and narrow hole in the ground with a roof of dry branches but we were determined to go on living and waiting.

The wind blew dripping rain and dribbling snow into our "housing project". A few times we were clobbered by heavy snowstorms followed by numbing cold temperatures. We had transferred the potatoes to a nearby hole. Some days the wind was so strong that we could hardly keep a fire going. We were freezing, but not our lice. They devoured us. We fried their fat bodies and they hissed loudly but everyday there were more of them.

The war machinery had been roaring, thundering and rumbling for weeks but didn't seem to come any closer. Yanek was feeding us conflicting information. It wasn't his fault. That's how news circulated. One rumor had the Soviets just across the Zbrucz while another had them fighting in Kiev and a third made certain that both reports were incorrect. Panic spread among the forest Jews. One of the fighting armies would, without any doubt, take over the forest. But which side? If the German army came here...

The Sass and Epstein families announced they were leaving the woods for hiding places with Gentiles. We said good-bye, wishing each other only one word -- survival. We inherited the household, buckets, dishes, pails, shovels, potatoes and matches.

CHAPTER 33

For the next few weeks the five of us vegetated in solitude, listening to the cannonade. Yanek hardly ever showed up. Every detonation brought hope and fear at the same time. If the Red Army came first, we'd be saved. I didn't dare to think logically because logic dictated that the retreating Nazis would occupy the forest before the pursuer. In that case we hoped to hide in our old bunker and disguise the entrance with branches. That would be our last chance of survival. In the meantime our physical destruction continued. We ran out of rags for footwear wrappings and suffered from sore feet. We did not own our bodies. The lice did. No matter how many of them we burned, they reappeared in greater multitudes. On top of that we began running low on potatoes and cooked only one meal a day.

Daylight was already seeping through the branches of our roof when we heard a chirp. Mayer Gruenfeld announced himself. How he found us was hard to understand. As Milo said, "Leave it to Mayer. He seems to accomplish what nobody else can." Starved for news, we were glad to see him.

"The gentile population," he said, "is getting very jittery. They're afraid the German soldiers will come into their houses looking for food, maybe robbing, and they're chasing Jews out of their hiding nooks. Where do you think these people will go?"

We knew. They'd go to the woods and be scared again, just as we were. We also learned other horror stories. Since the country had been declared *Judenfrei*, some Christians who had taken in Jews with the promise of saving their lives, threw them out after robbing them of all their money. It was known that the Jew who had money, carried it on his body. There were cases when the Gentile called the police, telling them the Jew had invaded his home and wouldn't leave. Gruenfeld had already been to the Maliniak and found conditions there worse than in our place.

We told him we'd welcome company. There were only five of us in a place that held fifteen. He left and we didn't hear from him for a week or two. But we were not lonely anymore. Other Jews came. More than we could handle. They had to enlarge the trench. The first to arrive was Dudek Pickholz, commonly known as Dudek the Red. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man with a face full of yellow freckles and blue eyes that smiled all the time. Orphaned as a child and raised by relatives, hardened by a long confinement in the Kamionki death camp, he was rewarded by the *Judenrat* with the position of a militiaman upon his release. Most members of that outfit were hated because of their subservience to the Council who in turn were a tool in the hands of the *Gestapo* and *Schupo*. Dudek's soul was made of a different fabric. I don't know whether it was the goodness of his heart or the greatness of his wisdom but he managed to stay afloat and in tolerable standing with both the ghetto people and the Jewish pseudo-administration.

With his cheerful disposition and frivolous buoyancy he brought sunshine, even laughter into our dark trench. When one of us expressed fear of the Germans entering the forest and turning it into a battlefield, he had a ready answer.

"No use worrying what might happen because it might as well not happen."

In the dim light of the kerosene lamp we'd spend evenings listening to jokes and stories. Most of them we'd heard before but the change of mood was refreshing.

It was impossible to figure out from which direction the signs of battle were coming. In the morning artillery roared in the east and in the afternoon it seemed like it rumbled in the west. New arrivals appeared daily. They all talked about tension among the Gentile population who did not want the Soviets and did not want the Nazis. All they wanted was peace.

Soon the Sasses and Epsteins returned. Our dugout was overflowing. Some people moved to the old unmasked bunker. Nobody was planning more digging. We had to be liberated any day. Our potato hole was gaping empty. Dudek plied the forest more freely than Shayko did during the quiet summer days. The Red did not wear rags and had a "safe" physiognomy. He got in touch with the warden from whom he bought food for the cash the newcomers brought. The prices were outrageously high because farmers were hoarding food in expectation of uncertain times. Rumors had it that the front-line soldiers were as blood-thirsty as the *SS* and the *Gestapo*.

The last to arrive were the elderly woman, Mrs. Weissbrod and her middle-aged son, Abraham. They had considered themselves safe in an isolated farmhouse under the sponsorship of a wealthy Gentile family. But one day a retreating German outpost occupied the house and the stable. Their frightened patron ordered the Jews out of their attic hideout. They fled in the middle of the night jumping out through a back window. A few minutes after they left, Soviet fire destroyed the building.

Gruenfeld did not stay with us. He was still the floating ghost, running from place to place. I did not meet him until after the war in 1945 in Gliwice, Poland. Even then he surrounded himself with a cloak of mystery. Nobody knew about his comings and goings.

Mrs. Weissbrod seemed to be in shock and very helpless. Her husband had perished in the ghetto. They had lived as a respected, well-liked and well-off family before the war. Now she suffered in silence but her son acted like a spoiled brat. A sour complainer, he expected comfort not only for his mother but also for himself. In our misery we ignored him. Nothing and nobody was important now. We expected liberation or ...death. But we hoped for liberation.

And it happened on a cold wintry morning.

The first streak of light was breaking into our trench through the cracks between the twigs when we heard Dudek's voice, jagged with excitement, above our heads.

"A guest! A guest! Company's here! I brought a guest!"

The bottom of a long brown military Soviet coat, a *shenela*, was lowering itself inch by inch down the small ladder. Dudek tore off the branches of the roof so the representative of the Red Army could stand straight and tall with his head above the ground. I could hardly believe my eyes. The military activities didn't sound any louder lately than on any other day, yet...the miracle had finally happened. The soldier spent only a few minutes with us. He had to report to his superior about finding us. Many of our people, including Milo, followed him. But we did not let Dudek go. He had to stay and tell us all the details about his meeting the first Russian solder.

"I went out for my morning stroll," Dudek said, "as I always do. And it was quiet. You know. The shooting never goes on constantly. Sometimes it's quiet for a few hours. Then suddenly I hear snoring. So, I go behind a big fat tree and listen and look. It was still half dark but I could see men in their brown *shenelas* sleeping on the ground. They had made themselves a bed of twigs on top of the snow. I was not scared anymore. I walked straight up to them. I did not notice that there was one standing guard. He yelled at me '*Khto eto*?' and I yelled back, '*Svoy*. *Yevrey*. Jew.' I told him about us. The soldier who was just here was checking us out."

I still could not believe. Another dream? I had plenty of those. I was afraid I'd wake up, as I often did, to the old agony. But I did not want to wake up. I wanted the vision to stay with me. Voices passed my ears, faces transposed into faces. I saw and heard commotion. It took many long minutes for my subconscious to persuade my real, practical mind that I was not daydreaming. It was true. We were free. We had been liberated.

I was sure I'd swoon inside on regaining freedom. I did not. I was supposed to be elated. I was not. It was not a victory. It was survival at an enormous cost. I did not know if I should cry for all those who had died or for our uncertain future. We were a bunch of hungry, dirty, lousy beggars. What's there to celebrate? Pressed between two demented structures, communism and Nazism, that could only destroy but not build, I was wondering whether there was anything left of the normal way of life. I was looking forward to a new beginning but how does one start at the age of thirty, naked like a new-born baby. I was too old for empty dreams and too hurt for juvenile fantasies. I felt a brutal realist. The anti-Semitism would probably renew the cycle of hate against the survivors, the abstract people with roots in a far-away land.

But then I remembered my two younger brothers. I was sure Jozek would return. When we still lived in the ghetto many Ukrainian boys who had been drafted into the Red Army in the spring of 1941, ran away during the massive Soviet retreat of that summer and returned to their families. This generated mistrust among the Soviet leaders toward recruits from the Western Ukraine. The so-called *Zapadniki* were not sent to the front lines anymore. I based all my hope of Jozek's return on that fact. I also believed in Ed's survival though I hadn't heard from him since I entered the woods. His family had lived in a village all their lives and knew many farmers. We would not reassemble the scattered pieces of former life with so many members of the family missing, but we would start anew.

Milo and the other boys brought us orders from the Soviet army: Immediately vacate the premises. Transients were not allowed in the war zone. Since none of us had any personal document to prove our identity, we were considered vagrants. The soldiers advised us to go to the city of Zbaraz which was already in Russian hands. Skalat was at that moment the battlefield.

We did not leave in triumph. We turned from desperate homeless wood dwellers to desperate homeless wanderers. I didn't see much glee in the faces around me. I took a good look at the trench before I left. I wanted to keep in my mind the picture of the last shelter where we hoped for weeks and weeks before we were able to depart.

We marched and marched. The weak became strong. The sick recovered. After a few hours we were still in the war zone. At noon we found ourselves in the midst of a military zone. I saw planes overhead and heard detonations. The ground shook and quacked under our feet. Things flew high into the air and came back down. When it was over, Milo, Itche and Zalman were missing. After a few minutes Milo and Itche returned. Zalman who had stood next to them, was killed. Mrs. Sass was not allowed to see the body, much less claim it.

"Go. Run. This is a military zone. You're not supposed to be here," the soldiers told her.

Our large crowd broke up into smaller groups. The original fifteen stayed together until we were arrested as vagrants at the next army post. In the Soviet Union every citizen had to carry his personal document called passport which was designed to stop internal migration on his body and none of us had it. After spending a few hours locked up in a one-room cottage, we broke into smaller, less conspicuous groups. Late in the afternoon Milo and I reached Zbaraz where we met other survivors. Two days later we went home, to Skalat. Our house and most other Jewish houses had been demolished and sold for building material. We watched the ruins for a few minutes and left. The March sun had melted the snow off the foundation. I was looking for the hole that saved our lives during the Wild Action in October 1942 but could not find it.

I lived in Skalat until July 1945 but never went back to look at the ruins of our homestead.

Epilogue

The Soviets didn't pay any attention to the survivors. No help was extended. Ed and I married and Milo stayed with us until he was inducted into the so-called Polish army under Soviet command. He was killed in Pomarania in northern Poland in March of 1945.

Soon after the liberation of Skalat I received a letter from Jozek. He was stationed in Gorki, Russia. He joined us in Bamberg, Germany, in the summer of 1946.

Ed's surviving family included his brother and sister and their spouses. His youngest brother who had served in the Polish army when the war broke out in September 1939, perished as a Jewish prisoner of war in the Maydanek camp. Ed's sister lost her baby in the Wailing Graves action. The baby had been in the care of the grandparents. Of my large extended family only one relative (one of seven children, six of them married with children of their own), my father's first cousin Klara and her three-year-old daughter survived. In the summer of 1945 all the Jews and most Poles left Skalat for the West -- to run away from communism.

In May of 1949 we arrived in the United States with our four-year-old son, Victor, and began our climb toward a normal life. In 1954 our daughter, Ellen, was born. We worked hard, lived modestly, and were happy. Until a second holocaust hit. We lost our son to leukemia in 1977.